A photograph of a large, mature tree with a thick trunk and many branches, leaning its canopy over a body of water. The water is calm with some ripples, and the sky is clear and blue.

An Anthology of Hardly20/20 Flash! Fiction

**by Peter McMillan
& Adam Mac
Maku Miran (ed.)**

An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction

Books Published by the Authors

Flash! Fiction (2012) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction 2 (2013) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 3 (2014) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

The Brain and the Vat Stories and More (2014) by Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 4 (2015) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Collected Essays on Political Economy and Wartime Civil Liberties, 2002-2008 (2020) by Peter McMillan

Missing Stories: An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction (2020) by Peter McMillan & Adam Mac, Maku Miran (ed.)

Peter McMillan

Adam Mac

Maku Miran (editor)

2020

Copyright



This work, in its PDF edition, is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. You are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

For more information about the license, visit
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

PDF edition: September 2020

Dedication

To Bengue, Ollie and Lottie and
in memory of Lucy and Otto

Table of Contents

Foreword.....	xi
Insignificance	1
Reason Confounded	4
Knocking up against the infinite: How would you know what you're up against?	6
Why do I write?	9
Milt, Mo, and the Money Machine	11
Otto's Boat	14
The ESL Test.....	16
The Optimist.....	22
The Funeral.....	26
The Journey	28
The Reading	32
On Certainty.....	36
The Volunteer	38
The Panhandler	41
The Hidden Job Market.....	44
The Writer Who Had to Write Big.....	48
The Efficiency Ombudsman	50
The Death of Dogma.....	55
The Dissertation (A purely fictional account of the quest for knowledge) by Adam Mac.....	57
The Tired Face of Greed.....	61
How to Depose a College President—Being a Contribution to the Expanding Internet Library of How-to Literature.....	64
Mr. Greengrass	67

Philosophically Speaking	69
The Scientific Approach.....	71
A Place Called Hope	76
The Bookshelf.....	78
The Pipers of Hamelin	80
Back to the Start.....	82
Nanobits	83
The Outlet.....	84
At the Grocery	87
The Obituarist.....	90
The Boy Who Knew Too Much	92
Our Town.....	95
Shoes	98
Carrot Top	101
Ceteris Paribus	103
The Train Tunnel	105
Supply and Demand	107
Carpe Diem	111
Dry Land.....	113
Rage.....	114
Tradition	116
Riding the Train	119
The Talking Stick	123
My Undivided Attention.....	125
The Letter	128
The Uncle	130

A Strange Bed.....	134
Soma	136
The Obits	139
We	140
In the Progressive	143
The Garbage Audit.....	146
The Meeting	149
Top of the Food Chain	151
Late.....	154
Labyrinthined	156
'Risotto	159
The Walled City.....	161
The House Two Doors Down	164
The Queue	166
The Bus Station	171
The Hives.....	174
An Invitation to a Beheading by Adam Mac	176
Killer Voice Mail	180
A Fantastic Commute	183
Hindsight	185
Instinct	188
The Loose Screw	191
A Word in Edgewise.....	195
Evensteven	199
Improvisation by Adam Mac.....	204
The Recruit by Adam Mac.....	207

Excuse Me, You Seem to Have Fallen Asleep on My Shoulder	211
In the Beginning We Did Have Someone on the Ground by Adam Mac	213
Real Estate by Adam Mac	216
Revolting Characters by Adam Mac	220
I Couldn't Help Overhearing	223
Can't Get It Outta My Head	229
The Box	233
A Suitable Man of the People	236
A Sense of Justice	240
First Impressions	244
Virtual Sacrifice.....	246
Last Stand by Adam Mac	249
Fishy	251
Schmerdloff's Proposal by Adam Mac	253
The Intergalactic Brotherhood of Envatted Brains by Adam Mac	255
The Tunnel is Closed.....	260
A Fly On The Wall by Adam Mac.....	263
Nucleosaur of the Frigid Lace by Adam Mac	265
The Intersection.....	267
Getting Even.....	269
The Script	272
Boundaries	274
The Concert.....	279
The Ward.....	282

Mr. Clean by Adam Mac	284
Dr. Sangfroid.....	287
The Traveller.....	289
The Uncertainty of Being Earnest	292
Ollie's Story.....	294

Foreword

This anthology is a collection of mostly flash fiction, which I have been able to access and compile with the assistance of the authors. Unfortunately, the authors' previously-published flash fiction anthologies are out of print, and are, alas, missing.

As a bibliophile, I have a professional as well as personal interest in the preservation of texts that appear to have disappeared. The works included herein are the authentic texts and not apocryphal renditions. They are already peculiarly real or unreal, influenced as they are by the writings of Kafka, Schulz, Böll, Mrożek, Borges, the theatre of the absurd, the melancholic Russian masters, the dystopian Orwell, Huxley, and Koestler, the post-World War II Eastern European dissidents and Nietzsche, the iconoclast, not the icon builder.

Permission has been obtained after some considerable persuasion was employed to get the authors to release these works, yet only part, though a substantial part of the corpus (103 texts) has been made available and is sequenced by the dates written. Seven fictions are published herein for the first time. For the remainder, attributions are so indicated at the end of each. Needless to say, the authors were loathe to prepare an introduction – it's now up to the readers, they said – so I have inserted a pithy gloss as a lead-in for each piece.

In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to the authors for their willingness, albeit reluctant and somewhat less than enthusiastic, to keep these works in a library such as that envisioned by Borges.

Maku Miran, editor
Sasebo, Japan
October 2019

Insignificance

... lonely and wet and then nothing [ed.]

Ashen cloud banks pile one upon the other in the darkening western sky. The setting sun manages to filter only a few solitary amber rays through the layers of thick cloud. As if pierced by countless pinpricks, the cloud canvas lets through isolated beams of sunlight, refracting the light as the clouds mass and then expand to cover the twilight sky.

The glass of the shop windows catches the rays of sunlight that find their way through the clouds and bounces them back through the sultry air into the hurried eyes of the people passing from their labour to their leisure. The eyes of the crowd do not reflect these chance glints any further but absorb them as charcoal does.

A mantle of gray-black falls suddenly, draping itself across the shoulders of the earth, and instantly there is momentary pitch-black darkness all around. The lights of the village do not anticipate the abruptness of the transition to night. Street lamps begin to hum noisily as their globes gradually brighten, the heavy clicking sound of traffic light control boxes rises in intensity directing the play of colours above the street intersections, and private windows begin to emit their light soundlessly, forming rectangular patterns of whiteness on the sidewalks and streets.

The stillness of the brief eclipse quickly gives way to tempestuous gusts of wind, rushing around corners, down the corridors of streets and lanes, whipping about, scattering bits and pieces of trash, and blowing dirt and sand into the emptiness of passers-by's eyes.

The relentless winds blow in a storm of rain, driving the rain like needles into the exposed flesh of the comfort-seeking mass of pedestrians. The faces of the crowd seek refuge behind their buttoned coats and upturned collars. Hats float off into the darkness, away and beyond the village's scattered umbrellas of light. Traffic signals, regulating the movement of human and machine, blink in complete obedience to the prescribed design of their makers, while the swell of the crowd overflows the ordered lines and right angles of the streets and sidewalks. The din of honking horns and screeching tires fills the intersections with a dissonant and unpleasant noise that is from time to time joined by the loud swearing and the banging of fists on metal by pedestrians violating intersections from all directions.

The disentanglement of flesh and metal proceeds quickly and chaotically. The wind and rain and blackness hasten a resolution to the confusion. A few stragglers pass by in obscurity to one another, brushing against one another, plashing through the rivers of rainwater overflowing the sidewalks, gutters and streets. The rain becomes so dense that the changing traffic lights resemble a kaleidoscope—colours flashing, changing, merging. Red, green, yellow, red, green, yellow, flashing faster red green yellow red green, merging redgreenyellow... lowredgreenyellow ... WHITE—

One man, indistinguishable from the numbers preceding him to this corner, steps out—into the street from his curb corner and splashes into the choppy waves of the river coursing through the intersection and is swept away into the black void.

Next morning, the crowd, returning from its leisure on its way to its labour, stops and stares with bloodshot, vacuous eyes at a hat that has found its balance on the globe of a lamppost – but

the traffic light clicks and whirs to green and the eyes turn away
to face the dawning of a new day.

First published in Linguistic Erosion, November 4, 2012.

Reason Confounded

... human intelligence chasing its tail [ed.]

*blank
text*

Commentaries by (X) and (Y) on "Reason Confounded"

(X)

This text is the ultimate postmodern text – no author, simply a text that exists but only with the reader's participation. Most importantly, the text represents a refusal to enter into a language-game with Reason, a tactic that confounds Reason, since the rules of engagement for Reason are valid only within the medium of discourse. This is a serious challenge to the supremacy of Reason, a threat that Reason cannot defend itself against for its challenger appears one moment and vanishes the next. The text appears long enough to pose itself as the negation of Reason, and then it disappears into nothingness before Reason can rally its defences. Reason cannot find its adversary.

All of the weapons in Reason's arsenal are ineffective in this fight against an enemy that exists and then ceases to exist, or worse, that at the same time both exists and does not exist. The very idea of existence and nothingness commingled, the violation of the sacred principle of non-contradiction, confounds Reason. Circling in search of its enemy, Reason finds that the enemy is within. The principle of non-contradiction, the principle that posits that something cannot both exist and not exist at the same moment, is the enemy, for this principle which serves as the ground for all others is itself ungrounded and incapable of being grounded.

(Y)

The author, for there is one (although the author is understandably ashamed to reveal his/her identity) presents the reader with an unintended caricature of postmodern thought. S/he probably thinks that emptiness expresses the postmodern condition better than anything, and against this I have no argument. The non-existence of the alleged text illustrates the non-existence of postmodernism. The absence of any text demonstrates the lethargy that characterizes postmodern thought, in which any kind of nonsense can be legitimated by the dogma that truths are 'useful fictions' and absolutely anything goes in a world without ground rules.

First published in the Newer York, April 8, 2013.

Knocking up against the infinite: How would you know what you're up against?

...an even more farcical philosophic rendition of Waiting for Godot [ed.]

Two guys in a warehouse argue about Godot.

Each is right in a way that disallows
the rightness of the other.

One is simple. One is worldly.

One says the I-word is this. The other says the I-word is that. Neither can be persuaded by the other. It becomes a battle of wills into whose service reason, logic, faith, hope and all other forms of human understanding are pressed.

What these two guys repeat on the small stage is what the great philosophers have acted out on the world-historical stage. These thespian philosophers have captivated millions, not least themselves, over the centuries with their well-crafted scripts. In fact the play continues with no signs from the wings that the curtain is about to fall.

Schopenhauer, one of these great philosopher-thespians from 19th century Germany offers a preview of his *World as Will and Representation* with the following words from the ancient Hindu

[I]t is Mâyâ, the veil of deception, which covers the eyes of mortals, and causes them to see a world of which one cannot say either that it is or that it is not; for it is like a dream, like the sunshine on the sand which the traveller from a distance takes to be water,

or like the piece of rope on the ground which he regards as a snake.

Schopenhauer was expressing his affinity with the Hindu bias towards the real v. the apparent, the absolute v. the relative, the infinite v. the finite, the one v. the many, the permanent v. the temporary and so forth. However, one of the difficulties of this position as recognized by the Hindu philosophers is that

You cannot see the seer of seeing; you cannot hear the hearer of hearing; you cannot think the thinker of thinking; you cannot know the knower of knowing. This is your self that is within all; everything else but this is perishable. (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad)

What is unknowable is difficult to describe, which is why Wittgenstein centuries later, closed the *Tractatus* with the caution "[w]hereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

Nevertheless, the search into the unknowable continues as it began with metaphors like Parmenides' infinite sphere (the one and the uniformly perfect) and Heraclitus' river (the ever-changing but selfsame). What is unknown, notwithstanding its inscrutability, has been forever and richly described for the sake of the human imagination. It is eternal or outside time, one and indivisible, continuous with no qualitative or quantitative distinctions, unchanging and complete but not finite. Or, is it temporary, diversified, particularized, constantly changing and evolving? Kant said that this realm, the noumenal world (the thing in itself), as opposed to the familiar world of phenomena, was off limits to the proper exercise of human understanding. That did not stop Hegel from creating one of the great philosophical wonders of the world with his adventurous world spirit

which reveals itself through the unfolding of history as the Absolute's dialectical odyssey from the lowest level of consciousness to the supreme conscious.

#

And now for something completely different.

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of 'world history,' but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. (Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense")

#

"Hey, we just got a call from head office. Germany called and complained that they haven't received their expedited shipment. Where is it? Track it down NOW. I need an explanation in 5 minutes or there'll be hell to pay."

First published on Helium in 2007.

Why do I write?

... what about me, the editor? Hey, over here! [ed.]

I write because YOU are there.

I write because I want YOU to acknowledge that I am.

I write because ...

I want to influence YOU,
I want to impress YOU,
I want to intimidate YOU,
I want to enlighten YOU,
I want to liberate YOU,
I want to lead YOU,
I want to teach YOU,
I want to persuade YOU,
I want to motivate YOU,
I want to sell YOU something,
I want to enlist YOUR support,
I want YOU to validate me,
I want YOU to side with me,
I want YOU to be (to exist) for me.

If YOU weren't there, none of this would matter. Because YOU are there, all of this matters. Because YOU are there, I write. I can only exist in a world where I am other than YOU. As soon as YOU withdraw, I vanish. Writing ceases. Intentions disappear.

Who am I, YOU ask?

YOU know who I am. I am the writer. I have written everything that has been written, and YOU have been captivated by what I have had to say, even though YOU may not want to admit it.

Now, who are YOU?

YOU are the reader. YOU only read some of what I write.
That makes me sad.

I write for YOU and because of YOU, and only YOU can
read what I write.

So, why again is it that I write?

It's an ego thing.

Previously unpublished

Milt, Mo, and the Money Machine

... there's no end to what economists will get up to [ed.]

The other day I discovered a curious 1970s artifact stored away in a dark, dusty corner of a virtual bank vault somewhere on the Internet. It wasn't really a discovery so much as a happening upon something, sort of like "discovering" a well polished rock on a deserted beach at the end of the tourist season. What I happened upon was the 30-year-old record of a debate between Milt and Mo about the money machine. At the time of their debate, the money machine was breaking down, and the importance attached to fixing the machine was suggested by a new index—the "misery index," the sum of inflation and unemployment.

Now Milt and Mo were really important people, and of course the money machine is a really important apparatus that keeps the lifeblood of modern commerce circulating. Milt and Mo knew important things, and they knew that it was known that they knew important things and that what they knew was beyond what most of us know or could reasonably hope to know, and so when they debated, they knew there were a lot of people listening.

Because at the time the money machine was functioning erratically and causing panic in the crowd, and because both Milt and Mo were highly credible, people did listen. What people were listening for was how to get out of the mess and how to avoid it. The sought-after solutions were practical in nature, but underlying them were fundamental and fundamentally accessible assumptions, which persist today in the contemporary variants of Milt and Mo's money machine mechanics.

Milt believed in putting the money machine on irreversible autopilot. Of course, there's no such thing as an irreversible governor, but the intent was to discourage fiddling with the money machine. Milt was a lovely person, but he had a theoretical and heretofore unfalsified lack of confidence in human competence and integrity. So he believed that the money machine, which was a discovery of rare genius and positive value, would be most efficient if set at a constant speed relative to the long run trend rate of economic growth. Any rapid acceleration or deceleration would increase the wear and tear and lead to inevitable machine breakdown.

Mo, on the other hand, believed in keeping the money machine in manual mode with a designated knob twiddler watching and intervening with great care and wisdom. Milt facetiously commented that he would support knob twiddling as long as Mo was the knob twiddler, the implication being that this approach did not lend itself to law-like regularity and so the probability of human "*misintervention*" would be very high. As it turns out, a recent governor of the money machine, Mr. Greenback, may have been the consummate knob twiddler, effectively fine tuning the money machine and smoothing the cycle of upswings and downturns, even winning the praise of a sceptical Milt. For his part, Mo was convinced that while there were times when the money machine needed to be manually guided through particularly difficult phases of the business cycle, fail-safes, beyond discretionary human control, could be built into the machine to prevent it from going out of control.

Today, 30 years later, the world is filled with hybrid knob twiddler-auto pilots who run the money machines the world over. They are highly educated, well intentioned, removed from the distractions of fractious politics, and capable of judiciously

balancing multiple conflicting interests. They understand the limits of (others') human knowledge. They understand the weakness of (others') human nature. They promote the superiority of (their) expertise in resolving public policy disputes. They profess scientific objectivity in pursuit of good governance. They proclaim the practical imperative that the good of the many exceeds the sacrifice of the few. Finally, they bring order and predictability, as governors of the money machines, into a world otherwise characterized by conflict and uncertainty.

Now that's what you'd call progress! Some believe that with the Milt & Mo neo-synthesis we have reached the End of Economics. Now, wouldn't that be nice?

First published in Through the Gaps, July 6, 2014.

Otto's Boat

... the unseaworthiness of our philosophies [ed.]

"We are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it in dry dock and reconstruct it from the best components." (Otto Neurath)

This picture is a valuable metaphor—but for what?

At first I accept the standard interpretation, reading Otto's Boat as a metaphor for scientific discovery and the logic of progress. In this view, the nature of scientific truths is that they are tentative and practical in contrast to "truths" that are absolute and inflexible. There is method and reason in what the sailors do, ceaselessly repairing their boat, piece by piece, damaged and worn from months at sea through all the hazards of the deep. Theirs is a very small boat compared to a very large and very unpredictable ocean that stretches endlessly towards all horizons. Nevertheless, they make do with what they have to keep afloat and steady on their course of discovery.

That's one take on the picture. Feeling somewhat more comfortable with the metaphor now, I imagine another reading that interprets the metaphor very differently and not so optimistically. For example, the US foreign policy in Iraq—very far removed from Otto's intentional target—can also be captured by Otto's boat. In this reading, Otto's boat evokes a sense of disastrously failed planning and the imminent likelihood of tragic outcome. In this case, it isn't so much that the majestic ocean has worn away at the hull and deck and masts and canvas and rigging. It's as if inferior workmanship was used to construct the boat in the first place and the navigational instruments had rusted in the salty air. All of the maps were out of

date and practically useless. The sailors had come to realize that they were not on course for the destination for which they had been recruited and that, furthermore, they would be sailing the dangerous pirate waters where no friendly navy ships dared patrol. However, the weapons worked.

By now I have come to feel in control of the metaphor, and so I attempt to get behind the standard interpretation by making a few notes on the metaphor's artist and his times. The artist was a philosopher-cum-social scientist focused on the real world that science could know and eventually control. He was a member of the Vienna Circle – that Bloomsbury-type group of philosophers that was pushing philosophy to the cutting edge during the 20th century's inter-war years. Emboldened by the rapid progress in atomic and quantum physics, the artist and others attempted to reassert philosophy's traditional role while maintaining and extending the discipline of the hard sciences—a project whose symbol was its International Encyclopedia of the Unified Sciences. However, all was dispersed when the Nazis crashed in to restore order.

It is ironic that Otto's boat is such a versatile metaphor (broadly imprecise yet image-laden) that it can depict not only such different philosophical approaches to such different practical problems but also can—

Oh, look! That 100-foot wave in the near distance, just off the starboard bow—that is totally explicable in terms of our knowledge of oceanography and meteorology, but OH GOD!

Previously unpublished.

... a test you never want to take [ed.]

Submission **REJECTED!**

The following submission to the ESL Test Development Committee is insulting to 2nd language learners. Some of our students have direct or indirect experience with even more insidious forms of government and corporate intimidation, but we would be irresponsible to play on this and knowingly embed intensely controversial political commentary in our program.

If the author's intention is to critique the Government's wartime secret policing activities, then s/he should try something a little more creative and subtle and more fitting to the circumstances. This kind of suggestive editorializing through aggressively realistic fiction is inappropriate for an ESL class, which is, in a sense, a captive audience. To miss this point is to be dim. To ignore it is to abuse freedom of thought.

In addition, having seen these questions before, when I worked for another ESL contractor to the Government, I suspect that the author may be guilty of committing the Osberg variation, i.e., attempting to publish the same material multiple times as different works with only slight changes.

The author would be well advised to try something new or to submit his/her political opinions to the op-ed section of a newspaper or magazine.

Reviewed by: **PM**

Submitted to the Test Development Committee

Special Instructions and Test Answers
marked by ► for ESL Staff

►The following questions (1-13) have been designed to conform to standards adopted by the Department of Immigrant Control and Education (ICE) for its prototype immigration ESL test. In addition to the standard reading comprehension and grammar questions, there are three unmarked questions, which have been incorporated in accordance with the new Alien Loyalty Act. Although the ICE protocol dictates that the unmarked questions must be answered completely and truthfully before a student can pass the ESL course and receive a certificate of language competence, this requirement will be waived pending ICE's formal release of its ESL testing standards.

A. READING COMPREHENSION

Questions 1-3 refer to the following dialogue. Choose the ONE correct answer.

Two men in dark suits: Good morning. My name is John A. Smith, and this is John B. Smith. We represent Smiths, Inc. We will be in your neighbourhood for the next two or three weeks, and we just wanted to introduce ourselves and to let you know that if there's anything that we can do for you, we will be happy to oblige.

Grandmother at the door with young child: What are you selling? What kinds of services do you provide?

Two men in dark suits: We provide services to do almost anything for almost anybody. May we come in and talk with you?

Grandmother at the door with young child: I'd love nothing more than to invite you in, but I'm very busy with the children, and their parents will be back anytime now. Would you mind leaving a brochure and a business card, including an address and telephone number where you can be reached?

Two men in dark suits: That's very kind, but we'll stop by later, so that we can catch the parents at home.

1. Why are the two men in suits in the neighbourhood?
 - (A) They are soliciting donations for a charity.
 - (B) They are collecting signatures for a petition.
 - (C) **They are drumming up business for a dubious enterprise.**
 - (D) They are offering coupons for a new restaurant.

2. What did the two men in suits leave behind with the grandmother?
 - (A) A pamphlet and a key ring with the company emblem
 - (B) A one-page summary of services and prices with a business card attached
 - (C) **An uncertain feeling about their business**
 - (D) A list of references from clients in the neighbourhood

3. What did the grandmother offer to the two men in suits?
 - (A) A cup of tea and plate of biscuits
 - (B) The names & work telephone numbers of the parents
 - (C) Information about the household's schedule
 - (D) **An invitation to leave a sales brochure and a business card**

B. READING COMPREHENSION

Questions 4-6 refer to the following speech. Choose the ONE correct answer.

Congratulations on a fabulous 4th quarter performance. For the last three months, we posted record earnings, exceeding the expectations of even the most optimistic analysts. Today, our company is headed for one of the most dramatic turnarounds in American corporate history. As we look forward to continuing growth and profits, we can now say that jobs will be returning as well. The past two years have been an extraordinary challenge for everyone—from those on the factory floor to those in the boardroom. While I cannot promise smooth sailing from here on, I can assure you that our collective efforts to bring this company back from bankruptcy have put us on a sustainable path of global competitiveness. In the coming days, you will be hearing about new initiatives designed to accelerate our gains in efficiencies, earnings and entrepreneurship. I look forward to your support in setting

and in realizing ever-ambitious goals for our shareholders, our customers and ourselves.

4. What is the primary purpose of the CEO's speech?

- (A) To promote the company to industry analysts listening to the YouTube broadcast
- (B) To reduce employee anxiety about job security and end the rumours about pension plan restructuring
- **(C) To motivate employees to accept further changes**
- (D) To celebrate the 4th quarter performance and to announce year-end bonuses

5. Which of the following was neither expressed nor implied in the CEO's speech?

- (A) The company filed for bankruptcy.
- (B) The company is publicly held.
- (C) The company relies on exports.
- **(D) The company has reported profits for two consecutive quarters.**

6. Which of the following best describes the company?

- (A) A New York subsidiary of a Canadian bank with significant investments in Latin America
- (B) An American distributor for a Chinese manufacturer of swimming pool equipment assembled in Canada
- (C) A San Diego-based subsidiary of a British travel agency recently acquired by another British travel agency
- **(D) An American manufacturer supplying international markets**

C. GRAMMAR and COMPOSITION

For questions 7-13, fill in the blank with the ONE correct answer.

7. On Thursday evening, there will be a(n) _____ city council meeting to discuss proposed urban renewal and zoning changes to the downtown quadrant marked C4 on your map.

- (A) *in camera*
- **(B) open**
- (C) temporary
- (D) contractors only

8. Through an innovative partnership agreement with our tax auditor and management consulting firm, our production facilities in China, Myanmar and the northern shore of Lake Ontario _____ certified as ISO 9000 compliant for the last two years.

- (A) should have been
- (B) **have been**
- (C) will be
- (D) might have been

*Are you now or have you ever been
in this country illegally?*

9. _____ arriving at the Anchorage airport, please go to the arrival lounge and look for someone with a sign reading "Welcome to the Convention on Global Warming and the 21st Century Arctic Entrepreneur."

- (A) Unless
- (B) While
- (C) Upon
- (D) Before

10. This country's Declaration of Independence states that government is obliged to respect and protect the rights of the individual to "Life, Liberty and _____."

- (A) Property
- (B) **the pursuit of Happiness**
- (C) the American Dream
- (D) Democracy

*Do you now or have you ever intended violence
towards this country or its citizens?*

11. The Southeast is one of the _____ progressive regions in the country, which is why it is so attractive for investment, business and workers.

- (A) most
- (B) greater
- (C) least
- (D) best

12. In preparing your résumé for this position, you should _____ your language skills, your technical knowledge, your commitment to lifelong learning and, of course, whether you are in the country legally.

- (A) talk about
- (B) mention
- (C) emphasize
- (D) prepare

13. You may not agree with today's newspaper editorial, "Dual Citizenship: Separate But Equal;" ___, you have to admit that it brings the issue into the open for public discussion.

- (A) whatever
- (B) but
- (C) notwithstanding
- (D) however

*Information that you provide is confidential and
may expedite your visa process.*

*Is there anything else that you would like us to
know?*

Originally submitted by:
PM

First published in the Newer York, January 13, 2015

The Optimist

... life happens, get used to it [ed.]

A is unemployed, looking for work and receives employment coaching every other week at the unemployment office. Today A is being coached by B.

B is an entrepreneur and a certified career coach who meets with unemployed individuals who have active claims in order to assist them with their back-to-work action plans.

A and B are seated across from one another at a small melamine table, in between the computer kiosks and the pamphlet racks, along a bare and windowless wall.

B. So, how have you been? How is your progress on your action plan for this month?

A. So-so. You?

B. Well, I've just been short-listed for a major government project. It's all hush-hush, but I've heard—unofficially, of course—that I'm at the top of the list. Needless to say, I'm excited. This would be a phenomenal business opportunity. I think this might be my chance to hire on some qualified people to do the kind of stuff that I'm running around doing now, freeing me up to think big picture and long view—you know, expansion, joint ventures, IPO, and so forth. Ah, but hold on here, A. We're here to talk about you. So, how is your action plan coming along? It's been some time since we last spoke.

A. Hmm. Let's see. A few months ago, I put together a project plan to coordinate my back-to-work activities. Remem-

ber, we were sitting over there, and I sketched some preliminary ideas for the plan, and you seemed to like it.

B. Yeah. Yeah. I remember. Good idea. Great idea. Organization. Goals. That's the stuff. OK, so there's this project plan, now what?

A. Here. I brought along a copy so that you could refer to it as I explain where I'm at and what's ahead.

B. Great. Great. Wonderful. OK, let's dive in and see what's going on here.

A. Right. Here we go. Master résumé has been developed and vetted through all my references. From this master, I've created a set of template résumés targeting various combinations of geographic (local, metropolitan and national), organizational (government, university, business, industry and non-profit) and career (information technology, statistics, public policy and research) characteristics.

B. OK. OK.

A. Of course, all the while I've been compiling research on prospective employers and on different sectors of the economy—you know, putting together a picture of what kind of work is out there and more importantly what kind of work is in demand. I've got these lists, which I'm using to target unadvertised jobs. And—this almost goes without saying—I've been responding to the advertised jobs in newspapers and online as well as those that I find out about through head-hunters, agencies and RFPs. You name it, I've probably tried it.

B. That's swell. Listen, we've got about five more minutes. I'm sorry, but I've got to make an important call, and I have to be somewhere in 15 minutes. Anyway, you were saying?

A. Well, what I was working up to was this. *Pointing to the project schedule and the itemized list.* I've tried this, this, and this, and nothing has worked. It's been six months, and nothing. You know my background. You know this shouldn't be happening. You know I deserve better. You know that something just isn't right. It just doesn't make sense, and it certainly isn't fair. I'm completely at a loss as to what to do next. It's not like I haven't tried. You know that. You can see how much work I've done to try to get out of this hole, but it seems that the harder and faster I dig, the deeper the hole. I don't know. I just—

B. Whoa! Hold on. Don't go there. You have to be positive. You can't let the negative drag you down. See now you've brought me down. I was fine until you started talking that way. Now, I'm getting depressed.

A. Maybe—

B. OK. Here, let's try this. Remember the session "Beyond Belief" You have to believe something is true to make it true. Believe you'll succeed, and you will succeed. Believe in yourself, make your beliefs real, and everything else is a cakewalk. Trust me. I've seen this stuff work. Working in a cabinet minister's office, I've seen how easily a strong and determined will can change the thoughts and behaviour of others and then can make things happen.

You know, only five percent of our brain is ever really exploited. Tap into that vast reserve of unused mental power and create a reality of your own choosing and design. Like those

designer shows on TV, only you design something much bigger and more profound than a new house.

Now, I don't particularly like the Yanks, but they seem to have figured it out. Pragmatism, they call it. The philosophy of the pioneer, the self-reliant. It works on Wall Street, on K Street, on Madison Avenue, in the best schools, on the gridiron, in the press room, on the shop floor, on main street, in Hollywood. It works, and it works best because it works the mind most. Whatever gets the best results. Doesn't matter whether left becomes right; top, down; black, white; good, bad; true, false. What matters is that you set the goal and then step back and make your mind up to reach the goal. It doesn't matter how. You control your destiny. That's all that matters. Nothing can stand in your way, if you have control over your will and your—

Hold on, I've got a call.

A watches as B's face—expressing such willful self-assurance as is rarely seen in unemployment offices—collapses. All movement, all colour, all verve, all life suddenly evacuated this dynamic and assertive face, leaving behind a catatonic shell.

A minute passes, then A's cell phone rings.

First published in Through the Gaps, December 1, 2014.

The Funeral

... conflicting taboos [ed.]

It did not come as a surprise. Instead of surprise, it was more like a sad resignation. After all, it was really the only conceivable ending for a troubled, lonely and unspectacular life.

In some places, among some people, the departure would have been marked with shame and disgust for a life wasted and worthless. Condemning failure and shunning the one who failed somehow seems to maintain the uninterrupted value and meaning of life. And so it is that death, or at least the thought of death, is put off—indefinitely.

But in this place, among these people, the departure is not so meanly marked. This is a place of conservative views and a people whose living roots stretch far back into the hazy and almost forgotten years of the Great Depression and World War II. Judging in this case would be expected to be harsh—very harsh.

In these days where families are dispersed across the country and even across the globe, the clan is something of an anachronism. All the more remarkable then is the solemn and respectful appearance of every one of the living blood relatives from the elder generation of both sides of the family, most of whom are in their 80s.

The image projected on the rolling cemetery lawn on that sunny and mild autumn day in this small south Alabama town and ancestral home was that of a latter day Scottish clan, American for many, many generations, but fiercely united in the

family rituals of death and the show of solidarity in the face of the unknown.

Judging there would doubtless be. Guilt there would be. Forgetting there would also be. Nevertheless, for one extended moment there would be a oneness. The moment passes into memory preserving the experience of the clan gathering to send one of their own to the other side and holding on to one another in an unspoken promise.

And so, the judging was hushed.

Only one breach had been heard, but it was of no consequence. It was just the perpetual mourner who marked the death of his loved one by seeking out every opportunity to attend the funerals announced in the local newspaper.

*First published in Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal,
Volume #28, October-December, 2009.*

The Journey

... just another 'coming of age' story [ed.]

It began the way they all begin. The tugging from somewhere out there, growing ever more persistent and difficult to ignore. The tether to home no longer there. All that keeps you around is the familiar, the predictable, the safe. What's out there is only vaguely understood. People talk about it, and most of them talk with the enthusiasm of explorers and conquerors. Few come back who have no story of great importance to tell.

When you're younger your instinct for comfortable certainties is so strong that it alone is sufficient to keep you home. But as your mind and body change and grow, independence and confidence develop and bring with them inner certainty.

Just as countless millions before you have journeyed out from home, so you, too, set out to conquer the unknown. In your haste to get under way, you set aside your quarrelsome-ness and accept all the provisions that your family can put together. You know that you can discard what you don't need once you've got well beyond home. The weight and bulk of all this stuff—how can it possibly be necessary?—will not be easy to haul even for the 20 or so miles before you can dump it. But you promised not to insult your family on your way out—whether from guilt or fear of the curse, it's hard to say.

Dawn is coming. Ahead, the scattered clouds brushed along their rounded edges with lavender and pink highlights tell you that the sun is rising just over the horizon in the direction you're headed. The air is cool and crisp. Apart from the soft crunching sound of the fine gravel underfoot and the non-melodious clanging of your load, it's quiet. The sounds in the

meadow to your left and the forest to your right are magnified in the morning stillness. There's no one else on the road, so you're alone with the rush of thoughts of the young wayfarer just set out from home for the first time.

You don't even notice the extraordinary weight that you're carrying. You've seen pictures in National Geographic and mail order catalogues of what hikers and mountain climbers look like with their massive, fully-outfitted frame backpacks. You figure you would be satisfied to be travelling so light. However, your backpack is so chock full that if it had snaps instead of that sturdy double zipper, it would pop open and shoot all your belongings out on the road behind you.

You've got things dangling off the backpack, a set of pots and a large black cast iron pan, a tent, a fishing rod, a life preserver, a camera, a pair of snowshoes, an inflatable dinghy, a double-end paddle, a plastic mesh bag filled with pears, tomatoes, corn and pecans from the family garden, a four-foot long cardboard cylinder with a laminated map of the world, a parachute, and a sleeping bag rolled up and stuck on the top of the backpack just above your head.

And that's just what is clipped onto the frame backpack. Trailing you at a dutiful distance of two-and-a-half-feet is a two-wheeled cart with a rugged mountain bike, bulky sacks and tins of dry goods to last for several weeks, and an overfull packing crate with exactly 100 books, including the Bible, a hodgepodge of titles from 19th century German philosophy, the history of economic thought, Russian literature before the Revolution, the nearly forgotten samizdat of post-war Eastern Europe, and Mr. Esslin's theatre of the absurd as well as a handful of recently

acquired titles on travel, bird watching, and wilderness survival and a prized first edition of the collected works of O. Henry.

#

Weeks later we catch up with the young wayfarer. He seems to have lost his bearings in the desert. In all directions, there is nothing but sand—flat desert and sand all the way to the horizon. And there's no shadow. Well, there is a shadow, but it's the shadow of the noonday sun.

We've happened on our traveller just as he is frantically going through all of his pockets and all of his belongings in search of— Must be a compass he's looking for. He's standing dead centre of a circle of footprints that look to have been made by someone methodically scanning the horizon from every point in the circle's 360 degrees.

Ah! There it is! He's located his compass.

With compass in hand, he faces north, in line with the compass needle and then turns sharply to the right, looks off into the endless sand and shoulders his pack and resumes his journey eastward.

He's back on track, reinvigorated by the thought that he hasn't lost his way and that through perseverance he has triumphed. Having lightened his load again, he marches forward, confident that he has all that is needed to come out of this OK on his own.

The cart is gone, left behind on the craggy rocks of some distant mountain pass a lifetime ago. All that remains of its con-

tents are the small volume on surviving in remote and desolate conditions and the second volume of the first edition O. Henry. Also left behind—miles back on the desert plain—are the dinghy, the boat paddle, the life preserver, the fishing rod and the snowshoes.

After briefly checking in on our young traveller, we again take our leave. As we zoom out, we halt momentarily to take in the bird's eye view of the desert. Off to the east, the desert ends abruptly. Beyond there is nothing but blackness. Our young friend is headed due east and seems to be 100 miles or so from the edge. A few miles back—near the spot where the circle had been deliberately etched out in the sand—lies the parachute, marooned in the blinding desert whiteness of a perpetual midday sun.

First published in Long Story Short, July 2010.

The Reading

... on the temptation to hypocrisy [ed.]

Before I read to you this evening, I just want to make sure that I have the right audience. What I have to read is not for everyone.

It is not for those worship power on the grand stage of human affairs. My reading rejects the use of arbitrary and abusive power, and it really doesn't matter whether it's an individual or a collective that's behind the power. So, to give a concrete example, this reading is not for those who believe in what the Bush administration is doing to America and the world. Or, if you prefer, you can substitute "Neutron" Jack Welsh or Christian extremist Pat Robertson or, less controversially, Russia's President Vladimir Putin, Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez, Iraq's militant Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, Myanmar's General Than Shwe or al Qaeda's Osama bin Laden.

If you are one of those who find security, well-being and meaning in submitting to strong leadership, orderliness and loyalty, then you'll find something more to your liking further down the hall, proceeding clockwise. Check in at the first security screening station on your right, and wait to be escorted to the stadium.

Likewise, what I have to read this evening is not for those who spend their lives selling things—knickknacks, vacuum cleaners, infinity, commodity futures, cars, justice, lottery tickets, collectibles. My reading rejects this mendacity, this human weakness and inclination to lie, deceive and cheat for the sake

of making a living, making a fortune, serving a cause, or leading a cause.

If you are a shopkeeper or merchant of luxuries, a snake oil salesman or a pharmaceutical salesman, an evangelist or a critical rationalist, a barker or an industry analyst, then you've probably come to the wrong reading. You should try either the room clockwise and two doors down to your right and before you reach the maintenance closet or the last room on your left, counterclockwise and before the corridor forks.

There's still quite a crowd out there. Usually, by this point, the empty seats far outnumber the occupied seats. However, there's still the matter of terminal optimism. We've lost some already, but there may still be a few whose optimism conceals an obedient conformity and a 'best of all possible worlds' confidence. For you, the terminally optimistic, there are many happier and more pleasant places, and you shouldn't have any difficulty finding them. Basically, you can choose any other room than this one. Any direction, any room will be the same for you and better than this one.

Now, I thought that we had covered this next group, but I recognize some faces in the audience. There, on the second row at the end, I see the project director—Der Führer he was called—a tyrant who was rumoured to have seizures of terror when summoned to the 13th floor. At the opposite end of the row is little Jackie Russell, his predecessor and rival, a master of the twilight years' game of boardroom shuffleboard, whose administrative fearsomeness was legendary until he publicly relieved himself at the feet of his scolding mistress. On the back row, I recognize the Vietnam War draft dodger whose '60s appearance and anti-Establishment demeanour didn't quite

square with his Sinophobia and his contempt for anyone beneath his rank. Ah, and there, front row centre, is the ubiquitous supervisor known for his puppy-like prancing as he walked clumsily alongside his long-legged master, growling occasionally at something or at nothing at all.

This reading is assuredly not for you who must dominate or control others in order to feel self-worth. Your arbitrary and abusive power, even though limited to a relatively small stage is rejected. You might consider the previously mentioned maintenance closet, for there you will have no rivals.

Finally, we come to the catchall grouping that includes those who feel that they have been chosen from among the rest of us as well as those who speak with absolute certainty and the conviction that truth belongs to them. My reading rejects both the chosen and the truth owners, just as their false superiority rejects my reading.

For you in the former group, you'll want to take the up escalator, located on your left and just beyond the point where the corridor forks. Remember, that is counterclockwise from here and beyond where the shopkeepers are gathered. Once you've reached the next level, your path should be well signed for you, or so I have been told. No one who has been to the next level has ever come back. But then we've never had any reason to dispute what the chosen have told us. So, there you are.

For the latter group—the proprietors of truth—I recommend a proper clockwise stroll through this corridor of ours. You'll see for yourselves that there is no place to rest or wait. Eventually, you'll end up back here, where, like me, you may find the lectern free.

With these words, the reader steps away from the lectern, walks out into the corridor and turns to the right. The chairs in the audience are now completely empty. No one is left. With the reader gone, the lectern stands motionless and soundless before row on row of noiseless and inert chairs.

Previously unpublished.

On Certainty

... the importance of fixations for developing identity [ed.]

What makes a five-year-old choose to say "I think that" instead of "I know that?" Is it possible for a five-year-old to appreciate the difference between belief and knowledge? Where would he get such an idea?

When I was five, I used to say "I think that" a lot, and as I recall, I deliberately chose to say "think" and not "know." It's as if I recognized the limits of what I knew and wanted to make sure that I didn't pretend more than I knew. Pretending to know didn't count. If I saw it, so would everybody else.

At the time, I was making inquiries into Christianity. I went to church and all that stuff, but I was not allowed to become a Christian until my elders thought that I was old enough to understand what my decision would mean.

I begged and pleaded to be let in, but I still had these doubts. I wasn't quite sure how I could get to the point where I would know what I believed about something as big as God. After all, there was so much other stuff that I didn't understand.

There was all that school stuff. I was too young for real school and even kids my age were in this new thing called kindergarten. It was easy to feel left out and intimidated ... not by adults but by little people just like me. First graders especially, but even my peers, acted so grown up and seemed to know so much already—how to read, how to spell, how to count, how to tie their shoes. A very small world can seem very large.

Beyond, it was even worse. There was this war, about which I knew nothing but felt immense fear. Occasionally, I saw the war on the evening news, but it was all the more dark, endless and unknown for the numbers that showed up on the television screen night after night. I did know one thing and that is that I did not want my brother to be drafted. Even though he was years away from eligibility, there seemed to be no stopping this war. Once I asked my father how long wars last, but he wasn't able to help me see an end to this one even though he had been in one a long time ago. I was afraid.

With school and the war overwhelming me, there seemed to be a place for something that I could hold onto, and since my family already had this something, I thought that it might work for me, too. But I just didn't know.

One Sunday morning I was looking into the bathroom mirror, and it occurred to me that while I knew this little boy in the mirror, there might come a time when either I would not recognize the face in the reflection or worse still would not like the person looking back at me. I couldn't quite imagine changing so much and becoming so different that I wouldn't like myself, but the future still made me feel a little uneasy.

In the midst of so much uncertainty, it became pretty clear to me that something had to be done.

First published in Writers Haven Magazine, Issue #20, Fear

The Volunteer

... a small world – not always good, not always bad [ed.]

On a park bench on the Mall, a friend and I are catching up. We met at Georgetown. She went to State and I went to DoD.

As the conversation comes around to the war memorials across the way, she predicts that one day we'll run out of room, adding that her nephew is nearing the end of his final tour in Afghanistan.

For some reason instead of responding to her anti-war gambit, I tell her that I'm reminded of an old Peace Corps' commercial, from the '70s. A cartoon character volunteers with the line "I'll take Tahiti," only to be brought back into line by a thunderous voice from the wings: "You'll take Afghanistan."

"It's Manhattan" she says. "It's 'I'll take Manhattan.'"

She continues—accepting this new thread—telling me the story of a Peace Corps worker she met many years earlier before she moved to the States.

"He was your typical liberal arts grad—no particular direction, only a romantic dream, but wanting to do good work in a nice place.

"I met him one day while he was preparing a fishing net to take out. He didn't have a clue what he was doing, but he seemed determined. We talked for a few minutes, but I had to be somewhere, so we agreed to meet again.

“A few days later, we met at the local hotel bar, had a drink, and then took a walk along the beach. Noticing how quiet and solemn I was, he asked why, and I told him about my grandmother who was terminally ill. She was the last surviving member of my family on the island, and she had no one else but me to look after her. I told him that we had lost our evening sitter who had just given birth to twins.

“I described my grandmother's illness and the prognosis, and after a couple of minutes, he suddenly blurted out that he would do it—that he would take over the evening sitting.

“Although I didn't know him that well, I had a good feeling about him. Besides, on our island, word gets around, so it isn't easy to run away and hide.

“Over the next few months, I remember how disillusioned he became. He complained bitterly how the Peace Corps was a pawn and the islanders had been corrupted by American imports, like canned tuna and food stamps.

“Every evening he sat with my grandmother, often into the early hours of the morning. I don't know how he did it. He always looked physically exhausted—the flesh on his face sagging and his skin pale and waxy-looking. But he really seemed to enjoy sitting with my grandmother, and she, though she never said it, enjoyed his company.

“Once he told me how much he appreciated hearing her tell the story of the two kingdoms. Although he was far from fluent in our language, and she equally limited in English, somehow they managed. Of course I knew the story of the two kingdoms. Every kid on the island knew the story, but not from school—

from parents and grandparents. He had never heard the story before, and it fascinated him.

“It goes something like this. There were two kingdoms—one to the east and one to the west. The Kingdom of the West was violent and brutal, and its soldiers occupied the island and enslaved the people. Years later, the Kingdom of the East came and liberated the islands. They were also stern and coercive, but they weren’t brutal. They took pleasure in giving assistance to the islanders, but their giving was not free.

“I often wondered how he passed the time when my grandmother was sleeping, because it seemed he never slept while she slept a lot. One morning, I found a rebound copy of the second volume of O. Henry’s collected stories. It was dog-eared from many readings and looked like an overstuffed suitcase that could spring open, sending its contents flying. I never got to ask him about the book. My grandmother passed away soon afterwards.

“After her funeral, I never saw him again. A few months later though, I did hear that he took a job with an American company on the island—doing what I don’t know. Even on an island, it’s easier than you’d think to lose yourself.”

Reaching down into my satchel, I pull out the first volume of the O. Henry collection. I tell her I have a brother I haven’t seen since college. Opening the cover to the inscription page, I explain that on the Christmas before their accident, our parents gave us a first edition set, inscribed with the words “to be exchanged at a later date.”

First published in The Journal of Microliterature, June 30, 2013.

The Panhandler

... reality is sometimes way more interesting than fiction [ed.]

First day

There's a new guy on the block. Haven't seen him before. Wonder what happened to the old man.

Second day

Humming "Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go!" the new guy greets us on his second day on the beat. It's a funny tune for the morning rush to the office. Actually, it's very funny, because you're caught between chuckling and wanting to throttle the guy who is mocking you on your way to work.

As I look over towards the hummer, something in his eyes reminds me of that homeless guy I met twenty-odd years ago in front of the Museum of Natural History in Washington. He claimed to have been a psychoanalyst who had been black-listed during the early '70s. He said that he rarely had regrets, but that when he did he exorcised them by shouting through the fence on 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Imagining that this new guy may have a similar story, I drop a coin in his coffee cup.

Sixth day

Monday morning—worst day of the week, worst time of the day—and again we're serenaded past to the tune of Disney drones. Not really thoughtful to hit us with that first thing. There's no place for self-deprecating humour on Mondays—not a chance. No money for you today, my friend!

Twenty-seventh day

Monday mornings are starting to look a little better since Panhandler Pete came along. The "Hi ho, hi ho" thing doesn't

seem as provocative as it once did. And he's taken to surprising us. Last week, he did magic tricks. At first we didn't stop to see his magic show. But when we had to wait for the light to change, we would look on and gradually move closer to see better. As the week wore on, we just stopped in front of Pete to watch his show, letting light after light change as we stood there—entertained. I was late for work twice last week, although my official explanation was—er—train delays.

Today, Pete has a new set of tricks. He's making stock picks. He runs through 10 stocks and gives his buy, sell, and hold opinions. It's almost laughable, except that as he speaks, deftly turning the jargon of the Street into a melody that inspires boldness, I recognize this voice, this artistry with the language of commerce, this compelling and musical pitch. Pete, Panhandler Pete, is my former stockbroker, the guy who landed me in my current jam, holding worthless IPO stocks, hedge funds, and mortgage securities. Yeah, thanks to Pete, I have to work two jobs. I'd like to go over to him and give him what for, but it just wouldn't look right and might cause a commotion. Maybe I'll just stop by and whisper something to him—something like "It's good to see you again."

Thirty-seventh day

It's been brutally cold this week. Don't know how these guys do it, but there he is day in and day out. I haven't forgotten about our history, and when I drop a coin in his cup, I always greet him by name. He was taken aback the first couple of times I called him by name, but he's come to accept that his identity is not completely hidden. He's not doing the stock picks anymore. The magic tricks are out, too. Now, he's just shrunk into a ball as tight as can be to give the wind less to cut into. You don't see any flesh. It's all tucked away into this snow-

encrusted human ball. As I come closer to drop my coins into the cup, which is almost hidden in the white snow, I see a yellowish stain in the snow. My god! At that moment I forget everything about why I hate this man. I reach down and ask whether I can take him someplace warm. He raises his head slowly and chokes out words to the effect that I should smile, because it isn't as bad as it looks.

Forty-first day

All weekend I couldn't get the image of Panhandler Pete out of my head. I brought a throw, or blanket, or whatever it's called. I can't give it to him. There's one of the kids who saw his magic show. I'll ask her to give it to him. As she takes it over to him, he turns his head towards her, and I am speechless. It's not Pete. I shuffle over through the snow, and ask what happened to Pete. The old man tells me that Pete was just filling in for him. So, I ask where Pete has gone, and the old man replies that Pete has returned to his office in the building two blocks over. Now, I'm dumbstruck. He tells me about the wager that Pete made with a colleague that he (Pete) could not only live the life of a homeless person for 40 days and 40 nights but also could earn more money than all the panhandlers in a five-block radius. At this point, I'm filled with disgust, but curiosity makes me ask whether he won the bet. He did. My god! That's the third time. Oh, didn't I mention that Pete now lives with my wife and kids and the dog.

First published in Linguistic Erosion, December 31, 2012.

... *unemployment schadenfreude [ed.]*

The Ad

The ad said “whether you make \$1 a day or \$1 million a day, don’t waste time job hunting with anyone else.”

That’s an eye-catching claim, but it makes you wonder what edge they have on Bertrand Halperin and Associates, the long-time anchor of the back-end of the classified section.

This will be a good test for my new portfolio.

The Office

The office is smartly furnished. The building is old, but it’s well-maintained, so it can pass for faux ancien chic.

Bobby, the receptionist, is attractive, professional and polite, but after the introductions and the call to Robert, her attention turns to a tanning and fitness salon brochure.

Robert—pronounced with a French accent and thus no “t” sound at the end—runs the show. He is not French at all, but he does seem fond of hearing his name called. Robert is very smartly dressed, almost as if he and the office were designed together.

Bob is the third in the trio. He’s the guy that can make you look young and sober. Bob is also the guy that makes things happen. He’s the coach, the critic, the advisor, etc.

The Pitch

Robert makes the pitch. It's a \$3,000 6-month program using a patented methodology for résumé development, interview feedback and leveraging the hidden job market.

The hidden job market—that's Robert's theme, and it has been apparent from the moment I walked into the office suite. Bobby hadn't said much, but a conspicuous part of her introduction was a recitation of the fact that 80 percent of all jobs are hidden. And during my brief tour of the office with Robert, I met Bob, who claimed, with rehearsed precision, that 85 percent of the job market is in the hidden job market. I noted the discrepancy, but let it pass.

Now, Robert expands upon the hidden job market theme. It is the only way to go, he says, which is why it is the focus and the specialty of the firm. The approach has been so successful that patented material is guarded like a trade secret. Only clients who have signed non-disclosure agreements have access.

Robert clinches it when he concludes an already captivating presentation by insisting that *fully 95 percent of all available jobs never show up* in newspapers, trade magazines, corporate websites, online job banks, coin laundry bulletin boards, you name it. That figure, he says, is based on proprietary market research that is shared with clients. It includes a secondary hidden job market that has long remained untapped within the more familiar primary hidden job market. Again Robert emphasizes that once prospects become clients, they also become shareholders to whom the mysteries of the proprietary and confidential business model are unveiled.

What an extraordinary pitch—and pitchman! I'm intrigued by this marketing of the secondary hidden job market and wonder whether Robert is aware that I already have access to it.

Robert is certainly impressed with my credentials and my references and even goes so far as to express his regrets for not having an opening in the firm—a senior position reporting to directly to him. Never know when a vacancy will pop up though, he says. Quite right, I add.

The Plan

As Robert changes over to talk about administrative matters, I recognize that this is going to be perfect. A more timely and plausible pyramid scheme just can't be found. One or two things need to fall in place first, so I'll buy some time. I assure Robert that I'm interested—more than he can imagine—but that I need a day to move some—er—funds around.

We agree to a late morning meeting on the following day.

Walking through the revolving door and out into the busy sidewalk, I spot the coffee shop where I'll hang out until Bob leaves the office. I choose a seat at the counter facing the window, directly opposite the old building with the revolving door. From here, I can observe the comings and goings without attracting attention.

I am convinced that Robert was telling me that the job was mine as long as I made the necessary arrangements. What about Bob? Well, no job's permanent, and like Robert said, you never know when a vacancy might pop up. In the hidden job market, you have to be prepared for anything, at anytime.

As I drink my coffee and skim through the classifieds, my eyes are drawn to an ad that reads “Identity portfolio enhancements—passports, name changes, credit histories, work credentials, references—arrange for a free and confidential consultation.” The phone number looks familiar. I reach for my cell phone, punch in the numbers and wait. It’s Bobby! My god! How could they have known? And how could they be so upfront as to give their real phone number? The identity shop that I went to was a back-alley, basement operation, but these guys are operating right out in the open in the middle of the financial district.

There's Bob, but it doesn't matter now. There are no hidden jobs in this pyramid.

First published in Danse Macabre du Jour, November 25, 2013.

The Writer Who Had to Write Big

... and that's the way it goes sometimes [ed.]

Some writers write about the small, the everyday, the ordinary, and, turning it over and over and looking at it from all sides, the good ones turn up something never before seen in precisely that light.

Christopher couldn't tolerate the banal, however artistically finessed. He had to have the big theme, larger than life, steeped in history and suggestive of the future.

He should have been a novelist, but he was afflicted with a genius that grew bored very, very quickly. So, he wrote flash fiction – fleeting bursts of the imagination compressed into a short story that can be fully digested in 3-5 minutes.

His friends were polite but curious when they asked how he could write about epic themes in only slightly more detail than haiku. Of course, they never asked him directly. They always asked one another, rhetorically.

From an early age, Christopher was fascinated by the transcending. That's the one thing that he enjoyed so much about his religious lessons as a young boy. Religion introduced him to the infinite, and this liberated him from the common and the boring repetition of things and people and places.

Gaining entry was difficult and inexplicable. However, it was impossible for Christopher to navigate through the infinite. He simply yielded to the infinite. Although it was blasphemous, some even maintained that no one had ever mastered the infi-

nite. But that was a large part of the attraction for Christopher—an infinite that got larger the farther you got into it.

Christopher was not a scholar. He didn't have the attentiveness for that kind of work. In a library he would sit quietly at a table for 20-30 minutes, then get up, walk around, look through the stacks and return to his table with another 10 or so books completely unrelated to what he'd been reading. This could go on for an entire afternoon or evening, and afterwards his table would be covered with towering, unsteady piles of books having no discernible theme uniting them.

Christopher wrote better than average. He wasn't a great writer, just like he was not a profound thinker or serious scholar. But he was still captivated by the larger than life. As he grew older and as the limits of life became more and more real to him, he began to reach out again for the world of the infinite that had mesmerized him as a youngster.

He began to write—big. He knew he couldn't capture it on the epic canvas of a great novel. He could only see glimpses of it, and sometimes he couldn't even describe it in words. Often what he wrote would seem to represent his insight, but then on hearing another's opinion, he would realize how miserably he failed.

Over the final years of his life, he wrote hundreds of pieces of flash fiction—finite sketches of the infinite. He never published them, and they were never published posthumously.

First published in Writers Haven Magazine, Issue 13, The Writer.

The Efficiency Ombudsman

... on the trendiness of watchwords [ed.]

My 4th grade class decided that it wanted to go on a school field trip to see the Efficiency Ombudsman. Of course the range of options they were given was limited, and the Efficiency Ombudsman was the lesser evil. In other words, it was the last option given the thumbs down.

#

Our guide informs us that the Efficiency Ombudsman is the ultimate arbiter, or judge, in questions of efficiency, whether in the public or private sector. He is the efficiency expert par excellence and his technical credentials are unrivalled. He holds an MBA from Wharton, a law degree from Harvard, a medical degree from John Hopkins and an engineering degree from Cal Poly.

As part of our tour, we are allowed to read a sample of the emails that come across the ombudsman's desk. Unfortunately, we are bound to silence on the specifics, having been required to recite the ombudsman's non-disclosure agreement "so help us God."

However, I am permitted to say that the emails come from everywhere—people in manufacturing, distribution, transportation, public utilities, banks, credit unions, agriculture, government, schools, universities, hospitals, charities, churches, synagogues, mosques. It seems that everybody's talking about efficiency, and they all seem to be converging on this one office. Most say they want more efficiency—greater output in goods/services with lower costs—and are petitioning

the ombudsman to support them. However, there are a few who claim that efficiency, when pursued without regard to unintended consequences, can be harmful, and they petition the ombudsman to support them. Overall, the volume is extraordinary—somewhere in the tens of thousands, we are told.

Our guide apologizes as he explains that we will not be able to see how these emails are answered, since the process is quite complex and sensitive in terms of privacy issues. We do learn, however, that each incoming email must pass through a rigorous quality control check that may involve as many as six committees before a response can be researched, prepared, edited, translated, interpreted, logged, filed, and sent, requiring an additional eight committees.

I ask where all these people are accommodated, since I noticed in the lobby that the Efficiency Ombudsman only takes up one floor of the building. Our guide answers that virtually all committee work is done on-line. Then I ask how they manage a virtual office for such a complicated organization. He points ahead to the double doors on the left-hand side of the corridor.

He says "That's 'The Room.'"

I shrug my shoulders, and the kids look interested all of a sudden.

"That's where everything happens," he continues.

Again, I shrug, and the kids come closer, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

He speaks softly, "That's where the computer processes the request, simulates all possible responses and returns the

most efficient response, based on a secret and complex probability calculation."

"So," I ask, "where do the committees come into play?"

"They're in the computer," he says.

"I don't understand, you mean they communicate on-line as if in conference?" I ask.

"Not quite," he says. "The committees are designed to operate inside the computer."

"Are there people inside the computer?" blurts out one of my students. "Cool," says another.

"Not in the way you're thinking," answers the guide. "Here, maybe this will help. Picture the computer as an efficiency calculator. It's a super-sophisticated calculator that adds, subtracts, multiplies and divides all kinds of things—not just numbers. But on the screen, it looks a lot like one of your video games. Everything that the computer needs to process and respond emails has been built into the program. There's a research committee, a writing committee, an editing committee, a translation committee, a community liaison committee, a public relations committee, and so forth."

"Wow," say several of the kids, almost in rhythm.

"Can we see it?" ask a couple of the starry-eyed math whizzes.

"No, I'm afraid not," says the guide as he motions us past the entrance and down the empty corridor. "You see, it's highly classified, and I've probably already said more than I should have. But remember, you promised not to tell?"

"We promised not to tell what we read in those emails," pipes up one of the youngsters.

"Actually," says the guide as he fishes into his jacket pocket for a piece of paper "what you recited at the beginning of the tour—here it is—covers the emails and anything else that is described as confidential."

"Hmmmph!" interjects the youngster, as if to say "So, that's what you think, huh?"

As a parting gesture, the guide offers one last thing. "The computer" he says with a wink "is an incredibly versatile administrator. For example, it planned and coordinated in detail the Ombudsman's fishing trip this week off the coast of Baja California with the top executives of the 'big five' banks. And only moments before you arrived, it outfitted me with this tailored suit and silk necktie.

Another "Wow" from the audience, as I strain to keep my eyebrows level.

As we leave, we're each handed a complimentary magnet which reads "Efficiency Ombudsman."

One of the children suddenly yells out "Hey, mine says 'Privacy Ombudsman,'" and our guide turns red in the face and

helps me corral the students and guide them through the door and into the elevator lobby.

Out on the street, I tick off the children's names as we load the bus. A flash of curiosity makes me reach inside the breast pocket of my jacket and pull out the magnet. I notice that "Efficiency" scratches off easily and underneath lay "Privacy."

First published in the Eunoia Review, August 28, 2013.

The Death of Dogma

... how gentleness can seep through a hardened exoskeleton [ed.]

In room 99 in the hospice wing of the nursing home, the cleaner is in the room when the resident's breathing ceases. Standing over the bed, looking left then right, the cleaner takes the hand of the resident.

For an infinitely-filled instant, the cleaner experiences something. There is no sound, no feeling, no image, no taste, no smell, no thought, no desire, no belief, only something vague, but unmistakably real. It swallows everything and everything's opposite and everything in between—pain and pleasure, loneliness and belonging, fear and hope, love and hate, happiness and sorrow, strength and weakness, beauty and ugliness, black and white, rich and poor, big and small, truth and lie, life and death, infinite and human. Nothing can be discerned, but everything is still there.

#

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" shouts the nurse, entering the room, and surprising the cleaner who drops the mop handle, which bounces off the bed frame and clatters to the floor.

"Umh. Umh. N-N-N-Nothing. Just th-th-thought I—uh—heard some—uh—thing," stutters the cleaner turning towards the nurse.

Checking the pulse and breathing, the nurse relaxes a bit. Recognizing the expression on the cleaner's face, the nurse

reaches out "First one, huh? It's alright now. Just mind yourself, 'cause the state regulators are in this week."

First published in Postcard Shorts, March 13, 2013.

The Dissertation (A purely fictional account of the quest for knowledge) by Adam Mac

... just another take on the forbidden fruit [ed.]

The other day I overheard a conversation between a Philosophy graduate student and his thesis supervisor—where else but in the park. I don't usually eavesdrop, but I had a new cell phone with a specially outfitted sound magnifier that I really wanted to try out, and the conversation just sucked me in. I didn't get everything, because there were occasional attempts at privacy—code words, low whispers, nods, winks, scrawled messages, and pantomimes. However, I got the gist of it.

Let me begin by admitting my lack of expertise in the subject matter of the conversation—

Philosophy and interrogation techniques. In Philosophy, I am moderately well read, but on the other topic, what I know is one-sided you might say.

Philosophy is known for its clever paradoxes, shadowy allegories and mind-stretching thought experiments. In this conversation, the thought experiment was about a brain in a vat. The grad student described a human brain surgically removed from the rest of its body and maintained in a vat of nutrients and completely alive and responsive to artificial stimuli provided by a supercomputer. Acknowledging that many students initially regard the experiment as bizarre, if not inhuman, he added that most come to accept it once they see it strictly as a thought experiment. As a story, they recognize that the envatted brain allows us to think about whether the richly diverse world of appearances discovered by our sight, sounds, smell, and touch may be reducible to nothing more than electrical im-

pulses in our brains. In other words that 'blooming, buzzing confusion' inside our heads may only by spurious inference lead us to a real world of trees and flowers, bees and birds.

That's as far as I was able to follow the technical Philosophy, and it's mostly from what remembered as a night school student. The main point was that there is an ongoing debate among philosophers about whether and how we can know of a world outside ourselves. Now, the grad student wanted to decide the debate once and for all, and he was prepared to take the thought experiment one step further. His dissertation was to be a crucial scientific experiment in the Philosophy of Mind. And that's where the second topic comes in.

The grad student recounted how since 9/11, the government had tried all sorts of things to prevent another foreign terrorist attack. He described how the CIA had been authorized to use enhanced interrogation techniques in secret prisons overseas to gather terrorist threat information. Only recently, he added, the President had re-authorized the use of these techniques; however, the line between acceptable and unacceptable remained intentionally vague. Waterboarding and like techniques, he said, fell into that gray area, adding that they had (had not) been used depending on who you ask and how you ask.

At this point in the conversation, the grad student and Philosophy met the CIA in a secret prison somewhere in Eastern Europe. The grad student declared to his thesis supervisor that there had never been a better time to conduct real-world scientific testing of brain envatting. He reminded him that early on they had shared the opinion that with so much uncertainty about what constitutes torture, the status of brain envatting

could reasonably be considered ambiguous, especially if it facilitated the interrogation of terrorist suspects. Besides, they had agreed that modern medical technology would make brain envatting painless and reversible, so that torture would be very hard to prove, ethically or legally. Most importantly, they knew that the experiment would be a super-secret operation with multiple levels of deniability.

In order to secure support from the CIA, the grad student had detailed his plan for exposing a real brain to a complex electrochemical stimulus pattern in order to elicit higher order mental responses—thoughts, emotions and desires, not just the simple sensations of taste, touch, sight, etc. The grad student had hypothesized that if he could test the brain for signs of concept formation and emotive attachments regarding, for example, the greater good, freedom, liberty, this would be evidence that the brain could be directed to think beyond the vat. The CIA's cooperation was assured, he believed, once he persuaded them that by artificially stimulating the concepts of freedom and liberty in the brain, he could successfully transition the interrogation to uncovering the names and profiles of those who threaten freedom and liberty.

Suddenly, there was a shift in the grad student's tone, as he became very agitated. His hand fumbled around for something in his coat pocket, and he pulled out a stick of chewing gum and passed it to his supervisor. "They did the wrong guy," he screamed in a whisper through his clenched teeth. Eyes scanning left and right, he added, "The experiment was terminated and now they're after me — us."

I never learned who it was that they "did." Apparently, everything had gone to plan until the third day, when the brain

began to flood the researchers with feedback. There were names and profiles, but it didn't make sense. They were the names and accounts of the brain's ancestors. Its granddaddy who had served proudly in World War II; its great-granddaddy who had served equally proudly in World War I; its great-great-great-great-granddaddy who had proudly served in the Cherokee relocation of the 1830s; its great-great-great-great-great-great-granddaddy who had been one of the first proud slave-owners in the British Caribbean; and another great-great-great-great-great-great-granddaddy who was mentioned somewhat shamefacedly [sic] as having been a proud United Empire Loyalist.

Previously unpublished

The Tired Face of Greed

... what, no immunity from the lust of power? [ed.]

Why so tired? Because of the endless repetition. Without makeup and costumes, the haggard, sagging and jaundiced face of greed repulses. With no role to play, it has no power to command obedience and respect. So, it always seems to find a performance, no matter what the role or how commonplace the hall. The illusion has to be sustained.

Near the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the face of greed is back on the billboards for a new and grand production for the world stage. It has its fans and its critics but not always the same from one performance to another. Even within a performance, there is fluidity as the rhythm of the performance sweeps the audience into a state of exuberant anticipation and then abandons it to a dizzying freefall.

Today, we have reviews from two detractors of this season's production. The first is a starched-collared, cuff-linked banker from EU whose summary dismissal of the performance reflects a longstanding contempt. The production, says the banker, was never convincing. It was inevitable that greed—the “aggressive search for yield”—would lead to frenzied buying and selling of virtual investments until there was no more money to be made and the whole system of credit came crashing down.

The second is a social activist from Canada whose review has stirred such a controversy that it has been the subject of reviews. In the language of the post-Seattle, anti-Establishment generation, the Canadian activist deconstructs an icon of contemporary capitalism in order to expose the brutality that it

induces. Creative destruction—the dynamic force of innovation that keeps modern capitalist economies growing—becomes disaster capitalism when the boards are cleared at home, as in post-Katrina New Orleans, and abroad, as in post-Saddam Iraq.

The EU banker and the Canadian activist have stripped away the mask from the face of the tired thespian revealing an equally tired script. The mining of profits from high-risk borrowers and the highly profitable resale of debt to financial odds-makers—seen it. The convergence of American political, economic and military power on overseas targets for the sake of national and corporate objectives—seen it.

A brief intermission

What does it mean to think outside the box?

To be inside the box thinking about what might be outside?

To be outside the box thinking about what might be inside?

To be outside the box thinking about everything else that might be outside?

To be outside the box thinking about being inside another box?

End of intermission

The EU banker was tough on greed, but the world of the EU banker is not overly complicated. The EU banker lives and breathes perpetual price stability, regardless of the costs. Un-

employment, distorted income distributions, poverty and workers' rights are tradeoffs. For the EU banker, even common greed must be controlled by the market mechanics of wage-price flexibility in order to produce a natural balance between supply and demand.

The Canadian activist was tough on domination, but activists are judged by a higher standard—by the means they use to reach their ends. It is a cliché that the vanguard of liberation movements is highly susceptible to the greed for power, especially as the leadership requires sufficient authority to reorient, discipline and reward the masses.

The EU banker, unlike the greedy and short-sighted speculators who bring on financial crises and the greedy and self-serving workers who bid up inflation and drive up unemployment, claims to be thinking outside the box and beyond the temptations of greed. The Canadian activist also claims to be thinking outside the box, above and beyond the world of greedy corporate capitalists and their missionary economists and mercenary security forces.

As long as there's an audience, the face of greed, though hollowed and exsanguinated, waits ready in the wings to assume any and all new disguises in whatever box happens to be available.

Previously unpublished.

How to Depose a College President—Being a Contribution to the Expanding Internet Library of How-to Literature

...alas, probably not effective against all presidents [ed.]

These days everybody seems to want to know how to do something, and they want to be told in 500 words or less.

I've been commissioned, sort of, by a virtual company with a P.O. Box in Oklahoma City to write a how-to piece in the how-to genre for a how-to website. These websites, popping up like mushrooms, are encyclopedias of unqualified information, and I'm thinking I may have found a niche for myself.

I am committed, sort of, to this new Internet-age writing form that blends technical knowing-how with fantastic knowing-what and that enables everyman to become an expert, a writer, a creator and not just a consumer. At \$10 a guide, I have to be committed, sort of, because I've got a lot of writing to do.

The guide that you will be reading is my first attempt in the how-to genre.

In this guide, I'm going to tell you how to overthrow a college president.

First, make sure that conditions are favourable. Watch for signs like these:

- The faculty senate passes resolution after resolution demanding the president's resignation.
- Loyalty within the administration is divided. Even the registrar has chosen sides—both of them.

- *Time* magazine reports on political turmoil in the college, and it isn't about the football program.

Second, make contact with the leaders of the opposition. Start with the guys in Math and History. Business, Education and Engineering—they're followers. Philosophy and Literature—they're too thoughtful. Athletics—they're guardians. Best to start with the agitators. Everyone else will fall into line as the campaign gathers momentum.

Third, strategize. Identify the enemy's weakness. For example, if the president's only support might be an indifferent student population, the high-level plan would look something like this,

1. The objective is to remove the president's support.
2. The campaign must be short, intense and well-publicized.
3. The campaign must be completely student-driven and volunteer-based.

Fourth, deliver at every stage of the campaign.

1. Educate students about the issues in a manner that is unbiased and consistent with the campaign objective. Students must be talking about the issues.
2. Mobilize students against the president. Deploy a massive feet-on-the-ground, door-to-door petition drive. The petition and the signatures must be legitimate. The number of signatures, in the thousands, must evoke wide-eyed surprise.
3. Stage a media event for the coup de grâce. Coordinate local media for a surprise photo op in the

president's office. The media presence must be so overwhelming that it sends the president's secretary running for the door.

4. Present the petition calling for the president's immediate resignation. The president will have a broad but unconvincing smile for the cameras.
5. Wait. In two or three weeks, the board of trustees will announce a national search for a new president.

And that's how you overthrow a college president.

The usual disclaimers apply.

First published on The Short Humour Site, 2012.

Mr. Greengrass

... positively pessimistic [ed.]

I didn't know his real name. I called him Mr. Greengrass, because he seemed to be a dreamer. He was always looking for greener grass and often saying that it must be somewhere, sometime just beyond where he was.

Sometimes it was on the other side of the fence, or the gate or the wall—somewhere he was denied entry.

Other times it was in a different town, another state, or even a faraway country—somewhere but here where there was only day labour, soup kitchens and catch-as-catch-can shelter.

Sometimes it was another time when he would no longer be seen as subhuman.

Sometimes it was just in his head—a place and a time stitched together from scraps of memory and embellished with the bright and glittering moments he found others had casually discarded.

"Hate" is too strong a word for what Mr. Greengrass felt about the here and now. Besides he I didn't "hate" everything, only what had become too familiar. And it wasn't really hate.

He once told me that just because he was never satisfied—not hateful, he reminded me, just never satisfied—anywhere, with anything or anybody, including himself, this didn't mean he was negative. After all, he declared, he was constantly "looking outside the present here, imagining what's over there or what was once here or what will one day be here."

He insisted that his imagining and what he imagined were evidence of a profound optimism. "'What is, is bad' is negative," he said, "if that's where you leave things. But then," he added "it's not the same thing at all—in fact it's far beyond negative—to believe 'what is, may be otherwise.'"

First published in Postcard Shorts, September 13, 2014.

Philosophically Speaking

... and still pretentiously speaking [ed.]

This morning as I was sorting through the wall of books that wraps around my one-room apartment, I re-discovered in an obscure critique of Kant an irregularly folded page of handwritten text. It wasn't dated but it seemed to be in the same hand that had inscribed "George Glover / Knox College, 1923" inside the cover. I remember that the first time I read it I decided I must keep the book if for no other reason than to protect this artifact.

As far as I was able to determine this was George Glover's only achievement in philosophy.

In our highly evolved being we have become objective, remote, and godlike. Having reached our evolutionary apex, we reflect back on ourselves as if looking at something beneath or behind us. While we know ourselves as the being that thinks and feels and desires, we forget that the object of our attention is us. We have become the anthropologist who fills with copious notes his notebooks, memo pads [sic] and miscellaneous scraps of paper. Who sees but is not seen. Who questions but is not questioned. Who judges but is not judged. We have exposed the eclectic superstitions of our primitive selves and replaced them with an incorrigible system of truth. We have removed the nearsighted empathy of the human animal and have substituted for it the omniscient perspective of absolute mind. We have become our own gods.

Many, many years ago I liked that kind of writing. To my then rebellious and unsated mind, it seemed to get beneath the surface tension of everyday life and to grab hold of the large and the eternal.

Now, I just can't stomach the stuff. It comes back up half-chewed, leaving a burning rawness in the back of my throat.

#

The buzzer interrupts my packing. I shout "Fred?" into the intercom, and Fred shouts back "Yeah." I buzz the door open so that Fred can come up. Fred is my friend. He's helping me sell off the contents of my little room. Fred can't read, so I number the boxes. Fred told me once—out of the blue—that he's never had indigestion.

First published in Danse Macabre du Jour November 23, 2015.

The Scientific Approach

... should/does science fight dirty, too? [ed.]

Professor Beta (short for Bhattacharya) is a brilliant but peculiar college physics professor known to three generations of us MacScott's.

Every year we get together for the holidays to drink and reminisce or gossip or mourn, depending on who has the floor. This time, it was cousin Mickey's turn.

Mickey, in his first year of college, captured our attention when he mentioned Professor Beta. We'd all heard stories about the professor and always looked forward to new ones.

#

Last semester Professor Beta made a wager with our freshman Physics class. We were all about to fail, so Professor Beta offered us a bet. If we won, he'd give us all passing grades.

To win, we'd have to catch him in a breach of the scientific approach—not so easy since Professor Beta is the incarnation of the scientific method.

In his world, nothing is accidental or random. Everything that happens can be explained and understood scientifically. Doesn't matter whether it's sub-atomic particles with funny names or the point spread in a Saturday afternoon football game, he always comes back to Einstein: "God does not play dice."

His logic and discipline are intimidating whether he's in the lecture hall or at a cocktail party, in the lab or in a grocery store. He's famous on and off-campus for his eccentric conversations.

Even a simple passing remark like "Nice day, eh Professor" can get you into big trouble. By the time you fully regain consciousness, you'd swear that you'd heard something about leptons and hadrons and black holes and somebody's nebula but couldn't remember what had started it all. It was best to just nod and walk on.

None of his students dared ask him a question more than once. The rest of the faculty and the administration always approached him in groups and from behind. And the mossy small business owners yielded immediately when he came into their shops and expressed a concern.

His formidable intellect and eccentric character are disguised by his diminutive build, his middle-aged pudginess, his balding head and his oversized and ancient black suit, which he wears every day.

There's one other thing that Professor Beta is known for—his calm manner. He never gets angry. At least, no one has ever seen him angry. A calm demeanour is as much a part of his scientific image as his bald head and tired black suit. Since the wager had to be verifiable, it was agreed that a breach of scientific method would be demonstrated if he was observed reacting in anger to any situation that might arise.

Max and I were to accompany Professor Beta for an entire day—from the time he got up in the morning until the time he went to bed at night. We were supposed to observe him every

minute, so that if he did lose control, even for a split-second, we'd have him.

The morning was unremarkable. Coffee and Cheerios. Read the morning mail. Made a few phone calls. Scrolled through the email. Then off to his two-hour mid-morning graduate seminar in quantum mechanics.

At lunchtime, Reuben on dark rye at his usual deli across the street from the Physics labs. Stopped by the corner bank and used the ATM before returning to campus for office hours. Picked up his mail, including the current edition of *Physicists in Motion* in which his latest paper had been published.

No one showed up for his 3 o'clock class—our class. Unfazed, Professor Beta settled into one of the desks on the front row and set about grading papers. Fifty minutes later, he bundled together his papers and headed off towards the library where he checked the current Physics journals and then scoured the stacks for books on quantum theory.

With armloads of thick and heavy textbooks, we kept back at an embarrassed more than respectful distance as Professor Beta went into the deli where he had his regular dinner—usually a soup in the fall. Afterwards, he led us back to his office where he added more books to our already overfull arms. Next stop was Parker Hall where he spent the rest of the evening going from one experiment to another in three different labs. And, of course, we had to carry the books around from one lab to the other in case he needed to look something up.

Around midnight Professor Beta finally went to bed, and we collapsed exhausted on his living room floor.

The next day in class, our classmates were eager to hear from us. We told them how Professor Beta somehow managed to eat the sandwich that had a cockroach in it and how he had gone to his ATM and found that his account was empty and how he had seen his latest published article attributed to a rival. But—we noted with bitter disappointment—not once did he lose his temper.

The class was amazed, probably because it hadn't quite sunk in that they would all fail the course now. Max understood, and with nothing more to lose, he stood up and asked Professor Beta directly "How couldn't you get mad when you ate a roach or lost all your money or got cheated out of a year's work? That's just not normal."

Professor Beta paused to find Max in the audience and responded that he had suspected that we had been up to something. He then told us how Stella, at the deli counter, had seen the bug and had switched the sandwiches; how George, the bank manager, had immediately corrected his account and then called the FBI; and how the counterfeit Physics journal was easily recognized because it had the wrong volume number on the cover.

In his matter-of-fact voice, he added "I never said God didn't play with loaded dice, you know."

Max, up again, asked "So what are you going to do now? You know you can't fail us all."

Professor Beta rose slowly, then walked to the edge of the front row seats. Lost for words, he paced from one side to the other, and then he stopped abruptly, bearing down on Max and

shouted that “But I can and will fail you, you pimple-faced, snooping cretin.”

And that’s how I passed freshman Physics.

“But the FBI? ” asked Uncle Ollie.

“Max’s old man took care of that. Seems Professor Beta’s been underreporting his income for years now.”

First published in Alfie Dog Fiction, March 10, 2013.

A Place Called Hope

... mindlessly pushing the rock up the hill over and over [ed.]

Today is January 4, 1960. It is 5:30 Monday morning in a small south Georgia farming town, and the only lights on in the town square are from the diner, squeezed in between the drug store and the barber shop. The college bowl games are over. Syracuse beat Texas in the Cotton Bowl and won the national championship. It's drizzling now, and it's expected to last all day.

In the diner are the regulars—the earliest of the early risers.

Sal, the proprietor—short and stocky, a friendly, round grandfatherly-face, and recovering alcoholic and chain-smoker whose two previous diners burned to the ground—turns out the same orders of grits, eggs, bacon, and toast day after day.

Elaine, the waitress—beautiful and engaging but a tramp to the Ladies' Auxiliary—looks tired since husband number four disappeared, leaving her alone to kiss the young ones good-bye every morning at 4:30 before scribbling a note for her mother to read once she stumbles out of bed.

Ben, the farmer—a nervous young father, whose weather-beaten face adds 20 years—spends most afternoons teaching his sons about farming, occasionally taking the smarter one aside to encourage him to become a doctor or lawyer or banker, even though the farm escaped the hailstorm last summer.

Frankie, the mechanic—a stranger with a badly disfigured face from some overseas conflict—keeps to himself, though no

one really minds, because his looks don't affect his knack for fixing any kind of engine, though Fords and Chevys are all he ever sees.

Henry, the truck driver—a pudgy, balding milkman who became a long distance truck driver and took to chewing tobacco when his young wife ran off with the revival preacher—only comes to the diner on Mondays, because for the rest of the week he is on the road somewhere between here and Bakersfield.

Today is January 4, 1960, and soon, a Facel Vega FV3B will crash outside Paris, killing one—but Sisyphus will roll on.

First published in The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, April 2010.

... a good backup plan though [ed.]

Cathedral bell door chimes send my heart into a sympathetic panic. My wife and I have been invited for dinner at her partner's mansion. I've never met him or his wife before and don't usually care for nouveau-riche business-types, so I don't expect much. Not much, that is, except for validation. And that just met me at the door.

Our hosts greet us at the door, invite us in, and then escort us through the great hall to the study where we have drinks and the customary 'get-to-know-you' small talk for the benefit of the strangers—the hostess and me.

After 15 or 20 minutes of this, I sense restlessness, and I assure everyone that I'll be fine—that I'll just have a look around the library.

The partners move towards the terrace with their drinks to go over their pitch for their presentation in Vancouver on Monday. The hostess excuses herself to the kitchen to finish preparing the meal.

The library had caught my eye as we were led through the hall. Two arched, stained-glass doors open to the right off the foyer, and since one was ajar, I glimpsed an intriguing floor-to-ceiling bookshelf. Now I could lose myself among books, lose track of time, until dinner and then time to go home. Perfect

What's on the bookshelf? Are they bestsellers, mysteries, history, religious, scholarly, cloth-bound, paperback, or just decorative spines? Is the bookshelf used often, or have layers

of dust collected on the books and underneath the books? Are there secret hiding places in the bookshelf for money, jewellery, love letters, wills, a handgun?

Maybe there are patterns to be discovered, which will tell me something about our hosts. I wonder whether he reads literature, and whether it's ancient or modern, poetry or prose, European or American. Perhaps she reads English history or East German literature or parapsychology.

Maybe hidden in the books is a history of their travels. Books stamped with book dealers' addresses in Buenos Ares, Hong Kong, London, Sydney, New York, and New Delhi.

Maybe the bookshelf wraps around the room. I've never seen one of those in person. How many volumes would it hold? Maybe there's a second floor or even a third floor, with sliding ladders on each floor and a spiral staircase connecting all of the levels, each with a hidden door for secret entry and exit.

I had no idea they were so interested in books. Maybe I misjudged them. Maybe we should get to know them better. Maybe we could have them over for dinner sometime, invite them to the cottage, to the theatre, or even sailing.

Suddenly, my thoughts are interrupted by my wife who is standing over me in the study, two steps from where I started on my journey to the library.

"Honey! Honey, what's wrong? How long have you been lying there? You forgot your medicine again, didn't you? We'll have to cancel dinner and get you to the hospital right away."

First published in Daily Flash 2011: 365 Days of Flash Fiction.

The Pipers of Hamelin

... revisionism in Grimm's fairy tales [ed.]

We have a duty to our ancestors and to history to set matters right on the score of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Our research, accessing family records never fully disclosed to the public, has revealed the truth about what happened in this small northern German town more than seven hundred years ago.

It is true that Hamelin was overrun with rats – big black rats that carried the plague, devoured the harvest, and attacked children and small animals. It is also more or less true that one of the first town hall meetings was held to address the rat problem.

Here is where the public record begins to stray from the truth. Our investigation shows that many small towns in the late 13th century were adopting public procurement methodologies. The principal innovation of the time was the mandatory minimum three-bid contract. We have evidence that Hamelin was trying it for the first time.

During those primitive times, contracts were still communicated orally. One apocryphal account suggested that typeset notices were posted on the walls of public buildings as far away as Hanover. That, of course, didn't take long to refute.

We confirmed that our ancestors, the pipers of Lower Saxony, all received the news of Hamelin's contract at about the same time, a month later. That was remarkable, because landslides were a common nuisance in the fall.

The residents of Hamelin were inexperienced and overeager and so were their officials. We discovered that in awarding the contract, the town came very close to calamity. The wrong piper – the one with the multi-colored matching trousers and coat – was very nearly put forward. He complained vigorously that the bid had been rigged and that no ordinary brown-trousered piper could ever deliver a town from rats.

Fearful of making the wrong choice and possible litigation, the town officials secretly met with the three pipers in the backroom of the tavern. An arrangement was struck. The pied piper emerged from the backroom first and shouted for the ale to pour freely.

The next morning the three pipers set about ridding the town of the rats, and by noon, not one rat was left in Hamelin. They had been exterminated just as Grimm and Goethe and Browning and others had said.

There is one final revision that we must insist on. The official story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin must conclude with the following words in a large and bold font: “The townspeople felt that they had been treated fairly through the new contracting process, and so no fuss was made over payment.” In other words, no children died. That was an historical inaccuracy.

Although not directly related to our revision of the Pied Piper story, this last item may be of interest. Six months after the rats had been removed, our ancestors were invited to bid on a new contract. The town had been overrun with cockroaches.

First published in Moon Drenched Fables, 2009.

Back to the Start

... simply backwards [ed.]

"Go!"

"Get ready!"

"On your mark!"

"Runners to their places."

"Next is the 100 metres."

Alvin jogs off the infield track.

Six gurneys line up for the helicopter.

A flurry of white coats surrounds the sprinters.

The world's fastest runners lie fetus-like on the green.

Alvin needs one more win to break the last record.

First published in 50-Word Stories, October 28, 2013.

Nanobits

... death notices for people in a hurry [ed.]

Today's paper had a peculiar addition to the classifieds – nanobits.

Very, very short obituaries for people on the go.

"Deceased, upward mobility, second-hand cradle, platinum cremation urn."

"Deceased, punctilious editor, donations to chastity [sic]."

"Deceased, corporate closer, PowerPoint slideshow grave-side."

"Deceased, efficient administrator, no survivors."

"Deceased, protective shopkeeper, self-willed."

"Deceased, imminent threat."

"Deceased, reserved."

"Births—"

First published in 50-Word Stories, November 25-26, 28-29, 2013.

.. a heavy dose of THC in that one [ed.]

Just off the interstate between Detroit and Toledo, you might see—if you look closely—a poorly marked exit to a modest-looking outlet. It isn't one of those sprawling villages of Nike, Gap, Liz Claiborne, Eddie Bauer, and Circuit City. It's a simple flat-roof, concrete block cube signed "THE OUTLET."

I've driven this route dozens of times and never noticed this exit, which is squeezed in between two larger and busier exits. I would have missed it again except that I happened to remember a conversation I had last fall with a young journeyman machinist from Grand Rapids named Dieter Knecht. Dieter caught a ride with me near the state line, and he asked if I could take him as far south as I was going. He was a talkative fellow.

He talked about this place where he had worked for a few weeks to make some cash before getting back on the road. It didn't look like much from outside, he said, but inside it was incredibly different and just incredible.

He described broad, well-lit corridors lined with storefronts, offices, and mysterious doors and connected by escalators and elevators to other levels and more corridors. There was no map of the facility, he said, but a custodian at the entrance would direct you wherever you wanted to go, and when you were done, you could tell him that you wanted to try something else.

Dieter claimed that it was impossible to exhaust all of the opportunities. But at some point you had to decide to stick with

something for a while, he said, not so much because you found what you were looking for as that you suddenly craved something familiar.

At one point in our conversation, I recall thinking that Dieter sounded like a character from one of those *Steppenwolf* or *Magister Ludi* books my girlfriend was into pre-Woodstock, so I began to wonder just how strongly Dieter was drawn beyond the familiar.

He was too young to know that all this had been done before and that one day he, too, would be permanently sucked into the comfortably banal. I'd once been open and experimental but had long since succumbed to the pull of the everyday and the substantial. Now, I looked knowingly, but without jealousy or regret, at myself 40 years younger.

#

The parking lot was half-full, but there was no one else around. Approaching the front door, I was struck by the stillness. No sounds came from inside the building either, and the solid steel door swung noiselessly.

This was not the great entrance that Dieter had prepared me for with portals leading off in every direction to unending chains of stores and shops and vendors and maybe even phenomenal, unreal, and psychedelic adventures.

It was an ordinary warehouse reception area with cheap industrial furniture—one desk and a couple of chairs, papers and binders haphazardly stacked on a rickety metal bookshelf beside a three-drawer filing cabinet that supported a dingy cof-

fee maker and an out-of-date wall calendar. Except for the desk and its orbit, the room was bare.

A door, to the left of the bookshelf, was the only way in and the worn carpet showed the way. I sat down and waited for the caretaker, but 15 minutes of unnerving quiet was long enough, so I got up to walk towards the door to find out where Dieter had sent me.

I opened the door with a slight push, and the sunlight rushed in to fill the rectangle of floor behind me, while in front of me the parking lot was still half-filled with cars, including mine. Only it was my red Opel with Cheryl's glass beads hanging from the rear-view mirror.

First published in Down in the Dirt, Volume 121, January/February 2014.

At the Grocery

... the difficulty of hiding from your past [ed.]

An old guy wearing a gray plaid fedora and a khaki jacket raises his walking stick to point at an empty space in the dairy case. A tall skinny kid in a grocery apron re-stocks the adjacent yoghurt section from a precariously-stacked trolley.

“How can you have a special and run out on the first day?” complains the old man. The kid rolls his eyes and nods his head, not so much in agreement but as if to signal to the old man that he should find someone who cares. Meanwhile his movements between the trolley and the dairy case do not slow at all.

I wait, but nothing else is said. Looking ahead, I sense something familiar in the old man, but I can also still remember not long ago being the kid. Anyway, I don’t say anything. Never do. It’s complicated. I was once contemptuous, young, and ageless; and soon I’ll be irritable, old, and finished. Besides, what could I say?

“Razor Cotton? Wicked percussion, man!” I hear myself say to the tall skinny kid who, with his back towards me now, reveals a gruesome picture on his t-shirt.

“How about a couple of those Yoplait?” I add.

Reaching towards the shelf, he opens his hand flat as if to make the entire display available to me and then turns abruptly to run after the old man.

“Hey, Sir? Lemme see if we’ve got that special somewhere in the back.”

“Don’t bother, son. Not supposed to have it. Clogs the arteries. You may have just saved my life, kid. How ‘bout that?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Save my life?” interrupts the old man.

“No. Never mind. I gotta get back to work.”

“Have a good day, kid,” says the old man with a satisfied smile.

As the tall skinny kid comes back to the dairy case, I catch his eye. “So this special, you have some in one of the coolers in the back?

“I must have been mistaken,” answers the tall skinny kid, shrugging his shoulders. “We’re completely out.”

“But I just heard you say—”

The tall, skinny kid recoils: “Say? I didn’t say anything. Listen, we’re out of stock, OK? Talk to the manager if you want. He just walked in. Over there by checkout 16 talking to the blonde cashier. The big guy in the black leather jacket with the chopper half-helmet under his arm.”

“Frankie!” yells the tall skinny kid. “This guy wants a rain check, and he’s really pissed—er, upset—that we ran out on the first day.”

Standing frozen in place I watch a much older Frankie the Fist on his approach, praying devoutly that he won’t remember me—now bald and wearing an eye patch and a very crooked nose—as the welsher who took him for five grand at the races.

Barrelling in my direction, Frankie puts out a great big arm to embrace me, or so I think until he pushes his way by me, making his way to the old man in the fedora.

He calls him Cy as he crunches him in a friendly but painful-looking hug, and then I remember. This is Cy, the guy from the murder trial who walked on Frankie's alibi.

#

There's the door buzzer. It's my groceries. I have them delivered now.

First published in Bewildering Stories, Issue 348 August 10, 2009.

... *When you can take the pebble from my hand [ed.]*

My favorite book as a youngster growing up in Roanoke was *The Spoon River Anthology*. I was bullied a lot. I was a funny looking kid, never had any friends, and so I was a pretty easy target.

Reading *Spoon River* changed things. I avenged myself by writing the obituaries for my torturers. I had a drawer full of witty, biting death notices. Occasionally, I wondered whether I'd have the courage to actually go public if one of my enemies died. I never found out.

In high school there was an apprenticeship course where we had to find sponsors in the community to teach us about their trades. I chose Mortimer Bridges, the obituarist.

Mort, which is what everybody at the newspaper called him, was an old guy who'd been writing death notices for 50 years, and he was good at it. He could write 100, 200, 500, even 1,000 words on just about anyone in almost no time. Of course, it helped that he knew everyone and everything that happened in town.

He was what my teacher called a craftsman. He never had any complaints. In some of the neighboring towns, families wrote their own obituaries, but not here. Mort had a corner on the market. It didn't matter whether it was an old migrant fruit picker or the owner of Singleton Farms himself.

Now, a small town like ours didn't lose a lot of people to death, only what was necessary to keep the population in bal-

ance. So, Mort had a full-time job in addition to writing obituaries. He was the county clerk responsible for birth, death, and marriage records and pet licenses. But he only wrote death notices.

The first couple of months of my apprenticeship, there weren't any deaths to write about. Gratified by my interest, Mort dug through his files. I was an eager student.

He showed me obituaries going all the way back to the Korean War. Most were ordinary deaths of ordinary people, but to hear Mort talk they were more than ordinary. There were a few gruesome deaths and the odd mysterious death. These had to be handled differently, he said, so as not to offend. That's when I asked if he'd ever written an obituary to get even.

That brought the tutorial to a screeching halt.

Mort collected himself before addressing these final words to me.

"Yes, I did and I've never forgiven myself. But if that's what's driving you, young man, I think I've wasted my words. There's nothing more I can do for you. However, there is one thing you can do for me. Write my obituary and write it with all the cleverness you can muster. Send it to the paper on my death. I'll leave behind instructions for it to be printed as is."

Previously unpublished

The Boy Who Knew Too Much

... youthful profiteering and the working herd [ed.]

Alfred was a genius. When he was very young his friends stopped beating him up and making him do embarrassing things. One day, Ernie, the leader and spokesman of the gang, got the clever idea that Alfred could make them money.

It was summertime. School was out. They took the bus downtown to show off Alfred's tricks.

But a bunch of boys, aged 8 to 11, with skateboards and smacking gum and wearing eye-opening T-shirts can be intimidating. So, Ernie told the gang to hang back and keep off their boards. Meanwhile, he and Alfred buttoned their shirts, tucked them in, spit out their gum, and crossed the street, heading towards an enclave of benches in the city plaza, near the fish pond. It was about half-past noon.

#

Alfred is introduced as a local prodigy (his word) and the youngest challenger of the world record for facts known by a single person. Only in the third grade—well, just finished the third grade—Alfred knows more facts than just about anyone else in the history of the world. Ask him anything and he'll give you the right answer and even faster than a computer.

Of course, even the office lunch crowd is not that gullible but plays along anyway, taking it as a leisurely way to spend their lunch hour on a pleasantly warm, early summer day.

Alfred takes questions.

“Who was the Orioles’ rookie DH in ‘77?” asks the fat, bald guy with hot dog relish dripping down his shirt front.

“Frank Robin-, er, Eddie Murray,” answered Alfred, a little more nervous than usual.

“That’s right, kid!” exclaims Relish still chewing as he tosses a gold and silver coin into Ernie’s cap.

“What’s a lepton?” fires the lanky, acne-pocked Bluetooth host in between sentences to someone in his head.

“A family of subatomic particles that—“

“What do you mean, where’d I get that question from?” snaps Bluetooth looking over at Relish who was busily cleaning his tie. “It was all over the news last week when—“

“How much are this year’s hybrid cars?” interrupts the chipper blonde who lives to deny herself food.

“The Honda Civic is around \$24,000, the Toyota Camry \$25,000, the Lexus GS \$55,000, and the Chevrolet Malibu is under—“

“That’s good, thank you” transitions the impeccably professional twenty-something with the slit-eyed glasses. “Now, how about this one?” she asks furtively, leaning forward. “What’s going on between the boss and Ted?”

“Why shouldn’t he know?” asks Glasses facing a menacing stare from Chipper who is good friends with both Ted and the boss. “It’s a fact, right? “

“OK. Here's another one,” pushes in the momentarily re-connected Bluetooth. “How many light-years away is the nearest intelligent life form?”

Alfred is stumped. He doesn't know whether to give the correct answer. They're probably not ready for it, he thinks.

Suddenly, the clock tower strikes one o'clock, five minutes ahead of time, and the rest of the gang bring out their boards and begin racing and jumping, making a raucous commotion. In a purely coincidental reaction, a few more coins are pitched into the collection hat, and the office workers get sucked back into the buildings.

First published in Drunk Monkeys, April 12, 2013.

Our Town

... small town blues [ed.]

it wasn't like this when the high school football team won the state championship.

For many years now—maybe 25 or so—the land around here has been drying up. Some years we call it a drought—and the farmers still do—but most of us have grown accustomed to the hard red clay and the blue skies and the blood-red sun tipping on the horizon.

When the tractors come out to do their deep plowing in the peanut fields, if the wind is right, we smell the earth in the dust that blows into town and settles on our windows.

Visitors and people who have moved away say we have the most gorgeous sunrises and sunsets they've ever seen, but then they add “except for on the beaches or in the mountains or deserts.” We graciously thank them for appreciating our extraordinary ordinariness.

Many leave us every year. Sometimes we sense that it wouldn't take much to lose the whole town. Somehow we keep a balance. We even brag that our town's population hasn't changed in the last 25 or 30 years. But we don't belabour this point with our teenagers.

A few return. Some who couldn't live here come back to die here. Some leave just to show they can, but these don't usually stay away too long. Some live and die here without once leaving.

We know everyone's story. All the tragedies and horrors—we know about all of them and all about them—overwhelm us in their number and closeness. We know the names, the families, where they worked, where they shopped, who they went to school with, if they went to church, what they did last year, the year before and the year before that. It's not like in the city where—or so we've heard—people live and die anonymously.

We knew from a boy the crop duster who flew into the power lines, or our brother who shot himself, or the old black man who walked among us with a sausage-like growth hanging down from his right eye for seventy years, or our best friend's grandfather, an invalid who died at home in a gas explosion, or the young teen-aged girl and only child, whose body was found in a burned-down abandoned house 20 miles north of here.

We endure all this but don't pretend to understand it. We try to protect our children, but they suffer from nightmares, too.

We resent being judged and ridiculed by outsiders. Yes, our church steeples are the tallest structures in town—well, except for the water tower. Yes, we have guns, and sometimes we kill ourselves, intentionally or not. It's also true that segregation never really ended. We have our private school, and we have separate churches and neighbourhoods, although some crossing over does happen now and again.

We still respect the hierarchy that wealth and status and tradition bring. We know that something isn't quite right, but in a small town there's only so much opportunity to go around.

All this we keep to ourselves. But this new business we can't hide. It's all over. Our children, our brothers and sisters,

our friends who are abroad call us and write us to find out what's going on.

What was once our pride and the source of our prosperity has become our shame and the reason for the quarantine. It is a blight, and we don't know just how much damage it will do. It doesn't help to know that this came on us like a plague, something from outside that poisoned us to the roots.

Someone in our town will have to pay, because outsiders couldn't have done this without help. We're a civilized and Christian community, but there's something timelessly appropriate about sacrifice. Right or wrong, someone must bear this cross for the town. That's the code. You have to know that.

*First published in Dew on the – A Southern Ezine,
12.24.2009.*

Shoes

... the critic on your shoulder [ed.]

Married, two kids, a dog, and two jobs—Ben was an ordinary guy. In a crowd you could scan past him five or six times and not notice that he was standing right there in front of you. Around the neighbourhood he was usually recognized by who he was with—Spots, Ben Junior, or one of the girls.

A nondescript man, an everyman, but a nobody. Got it. Next?

The writing still wasn't paying, but it would, he said. The other job, selling shoes, was 'research,' he said. It stretched the household income, but more important was that it got him out of the house. His wife and teenage daughter, who'd read all of his recent work, finally suggested it.

OK. The nondescript man is a writer who can't write.

Only a few weeks into the new job and Ben had filled several pocket-sized notebooks from the dollar store with bits of writer's material. Shoe sizes, foot odours, missing/extraneous toes, corns, bunions were of interest in the early pages. By page 11, Ben had moved on to capturing the subtle shades of customer behaviour between the polite and the ill-mannered, the modest and the showy, the parsimonious and the spendthrift, and the carefree and the morose. Moods and attitudes and demeanour Ben cross-referenced with the shoes customers bought.

This nondescript man and failed writer sets out into the world to find something to write about. Next.

But that wasn't the extent of Ben's research. You see, Ben liked to wear new shoes. And he had nearly half of an entire store to choose from. Every day, every lunch hour, he would slip into a pair of new unworn shoes he'd had his eyes on that morning. For twenty minutes—his best estimate of a mile—he would walk, climb steps, maybe run after a bus, and jump over spilled garbage on the sidewalk, always taking a different route.

This nondescript man and failed writer—now a student of shoe store personalities and their footwear preferences—is quirky. What's next?

On returning to the shop, Ben cleaned and sanitized each pair of shoes, because his 'footprint' was supposed to be figurative and abstract and uncontaminated but equally because he was fussy about cleanliness.

OK, very quirky, but not quirky and disgusting is what we're supposed to think?

Studying customers as they tried on shoes that he'd worn, he liked to imagine what it would be like to walk in their shoes. On his daily walks he wondered how the new owners of his shoes would carry themselves. Would they walk with a precise, measured and decisive step? Would they walk tentatively, weaving left and right, stopping occasionally to look around? Would they swagger with arrogance and bad taste, projecting an exaggerated image of themselves?

Now we get why this nondescript man is a failed writer. And his failure as a writer spills over into this off-stage compulsion to control real people in the real world. Clever. Next.

Though tempted, Ben never interfered by suggesting the possibilities that lay ahead. After all, he said (to himself), people have to make their own choices. Nevertheless, Ben took pleasure in considering his influence.

“People are characters, and characters are people, so give them their freedom.”

Every customer was important to Ben, and they were flattered that he remembered them. He had a gift for recalling faces and names and stories, and his customers marvelled at his incredible memory. Of course, Ben didn't share from his notes or his lunch hour walks.

The nondescript writer creates descriptive characters and conceals from them their reason for being in his head. We got that already. Next.

After the manager retired, Ben rose quickly through the ranks. Although it was never his ambition—which remained to become a successful writer—he accepted the offer to manage the shoe store.

So, the nondescript writer morphs into a nondescript shopkeeper, trading characters for customers, plots for business, art for reality? Tragedy. Anything more?

One day Ben noticed that one of his employees was wearing store shoes when she went out for lunch.

The creative urge forsaken but resurgent? That it?

It was more entertaining when Ben was a cross-dresser, wasn't it?

Yeah, but it lacked authenticity. This one at least sounds like you...us.

First published on the Short Humour Site, 2009.

Carrot Top

... just a blemish? [ed.]

My hero would have to be my 11th grade History teacher. She was an *iconoclast* in our small farming town in southwest Georgia. She didn't look or act like your typical small town teacher. And she certainly wasn't your country club type. She just wasn't like anyone else we'd ever seen—even on TV.

She wasn't ideologically to the left or to the right. In fact in the presidential election in our senior year, no one knew for sure whether she voted for Carter or Reagan. That's when she taught us what the secret ballot was all about.

She wasn't particularly friendly with any of the school employees, except for the janitor and the Spanish teacher, but, maybe because of her presence or her background, she was respected and even feared, at least in one-on-one encounters. There was a rumour that during the high school football play-offs, she had a run-in with one of the coaches. One version had it that he left the gymnasium red-faced and teary-eyed.

When you saw her for the first time, you would swear you were looking at Olive Oil with fiery orange-red hair, but you didn't dare think on it too long. She was different – no doubt about it. For one thing, she was from Baton Rouge, which sounded foreign enough. She said women there didn't wear calico dresses or giggle behind their hands or whisper in mixed company. That remark and others like it didn't endear her to her female colleagues.

What made her importantly different was that she treated us differently, like we were adults, even in our meanest, most

juvenile moments. Although she taught us everything the state told her to teach us—we aced the state's "quality control" tests—what most of the few of us who still attend the five-year high school reunions remember is that she taught us what she called "critical irreverence." All the icons—this is when we learned the meaning of the word 'iconoclast'—of American history and Western civilization she advised us to view critically and with a little irreverence, because, she said, too much reverence and too little questioning is sure to "keep you on the plantation."

One particular occasion stands out. Weeks before graduation, she defended a student who had submitted an essay for the state essay championship. The administration had moved to withdraw the student's entry upon learning the essay topic. She took her gloves off for that one – so we found out later – and gave the principal and his nephew, the vice-principal, a verbal thrashing that drew a small, enthusiastic crowd from the delinquents who hung around in hallways and parking lots until they became 16. From a more reliable source, we discovered that she even went so far as to threaten her resignation unless the student and his essay were reinstated.

Later that year, we heard that she had accepted a job at the local private (whites-only) school.

*First published in Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal,
Volume #30 April - June 2010.*

... memory holds everything still, except the one obvious fact [ed.]

Drew was a smart kid. His sixth grade classmates thought he was a genius. In the lower grades, he was a legend perpetuated by his former teachers. But Drew wasn't impressed. It got him nothing but trouble. His friends had over time excluded him. Only the class bullies sought out his company.

His granddaddy, an old-timey farmer, had been smart, too—he died last year—but a different kind of smart. After chores sitting on the bank of the pond with their fishing poles angled over the water, the old man used to tell his stories. He didn't have a lot of them, Drew came to realize, so he repeated them changing things here and there to make it sound like he hadn't told them before.

Drew had overheard his folks talking about his granddaddy's stroke, about how the tractor had run into the ditch, its motor humming well past supper, about the restraints Doc Cuthbert had ordered for overnight sleeping. He wouldn't accept that the old man might have to go into a nursing home, so he arranged to sleep on a cot in the old man's room and each day pretended the old man was getting a little better.

When his granddaddy died, Drew was shaken to the center. He lost a friend and a storyteller, and he lost his connection to a larger world. The old man always ended his stories with a pithy aphorism that Drew would later turn over and over in his mind as he was doing his chores. They sounded original and fitting, almost like they had come from the Bible. Once in Sunday school—he hadn't yet started first grade—Drew made the preacher's wife laugh loudly when he said that Jesus fed the five thousand people on five loaves of

bread and the two fishes that were too big for the small pond at the foot of the hill.

Drew's granddaddy had been an adventurer. As a young man, he had left home and gone searching for work and for something he couldn't describe. He rode the rails out of the cotton fields of south Alabama and through the endless pine forests of Mississippi, the swampy, bug- and reptile-filled bayous and the county-sized cattle ranches dotted with oil wells. On the other side of Albuquerque or was it Odessa, he'd run out of money and found work as a ranch hand and Indian fighter. He sailed out of San Francisco long before the bridge was built and made it as far as Guam, but when the war ended, he came back to Blue Springs.

Six years was a long time to wait, and to Drew it seemed like an eternity. Every day the school bus picked him up and dropped him off at the end of the narrow, red clay road that led uphill to the old farmhouse. The hours between bus rides seemed to get longer and longer, and days merged so that yesterday and tomorrow always seemed present.

With his granddaddy gone, he felt entirely alone, especially after he'd done his chores and sat quietly looking into the pond. Struggling through his emotions, he set about reconstructing his granddaddy's stories in all their variations. He remembered his granddaddy telling him about the underground spring shaded by a canopy of willows, near where he had grown up, that was so cold you didn't have to worry about water snakes. Drew was terrified of snakes—literally petrified whenever he saw one—and on the long hot days during the dry summer months, his daydreams would sometimes carry him away to the ice-cold swimming hole of his granddaddy's childhood.

First published in Aardvark Press, May 7, 2014.

The Train Tunnel

...a penny for the author's thoughts on this one [ed.]

Hello Christopher. This is Quentin.

Quentin Mc—

Yes. Yes, it has been a long time.

Have you heard?

About Eric.

Yeah, I'll hold.

Three 8-year-old boys. Just met. Families on vacation. Bored. On their own. Go exploring. Find railroad tracks running along the edge of a mountain. Put pennies on the tracks for souvenirs. Argue about whether it's illegal or dangerous.

Is this Christopher's secretary? Still holding.

Follow tracks around the curve and into a dark train tunnel. Unable to see to the other end, but walk towards it, kicking against the rail with their feet and occasionally reaching out for the cold, damp wall. Stop in the middle of the curve where both ends of the tunnel are visible. Continue walking. Wonder whether the railroad is still in use. Never heard a train whistle back in Gatlinburg. Exit the tunnel and walk along the tracks, leaving the rails once in a while to go off into the woods. Take turns rolling rocks down the mountain. Getting bored and hungry, turn around.

No, thank you. It's important that I tell him myself. I can hold a little longer.

Just before reaching the middle, the long-long-short-long sequence of a train whistle overtakes them. Turn in the direction of the sound and wait. Five, 10, 15 seconds pass and then the bright, white headlight of a locomotive fills the opening behind them.

Christopher? It's OK. I know you're busy, but you'll want to hear this. Eric went back to the train tunnel. He shot himself in the head with a starter's pistol.

Yes, he's dead.

No, I don't think so. Just couldn't keep silent any longer. You know how hard it was for him. But he wouldn't break a confidence. That's why we never doubted him.

No need to worry about that. We weren't even interviewed after the accident. Nothing to connect us. No doubt. Suicide.

A shame ... yeah.

It's OK, I'll be there. And I'll let them know you wanted to come.

Don't worry. Won't happen again.

First published in Dew on the Kudzu - A Southern Ezine, October 5, 2011.

Supply and Demand

... everyone has a price [ed.]

"On the savannah, the lion outruns and slaughters—"

#

"That's it!" declares the exasperated teacher pushing the eject button. "I'm sorry class, but I just can't get past this point. I don't see anything, but there must be a scratch or something," she explains, inspecting the DVD with her thick bifocal lenses then turning to the class. "We'll end a few minutes early today," she announces setting off a great clatter of chairs and desks. "Don't forget your homework for tomorrow," she adds hurriedly, by now speaking to the back of the crush squeezing its way through the door.

#

Martin is an ordinary eight-year-old kid. He doesn't wear glasses. He dresses normally – nothing from the thrift store and none of that faux-hood clothing. His father just got a job in Toronto. It is mid-January, and he hasn't made any friends yet.

Walking home from school, he takes a short cut through the market district and runs into a gang of six toughs who beat him long enough to get warm, dumping him in a snow bank behind a dumpster in an alley.

#

The next day Martin is prepared. As expected six black leather jackets pile into the alley, from the front and from behind.

"Think you're a pretty tough kid, eh?" challenges the tallest and the apparent leader.

He'd reminded Martin of a friend back in Chicago who spoke the same way and carried himself with the same swagger. But there was one big difference. This kid – maybe 12 or 13 – had a single black eyebrow separating his forehead from the rest of his face. The other five kids wore the same eyebrow.

"Not really," responds Martin without any hesitation. "I know you can beat me to a pulp again, but I think I've got something better to offer. You can make a lot of money and still beat me to a pulp."

"C'mon, let's beat him to a pulp" says the eyebrow that must have been second in command.

"Shuddup, I'm thinkin" shouts the primo eyebrow. "OK kid, how's this gonna work?"

"Well, we gotta have an audience," Martin answers, bringing out some of the emphatic gestures he'd picked up in his old neighbourhood,

"Whoa! What? Whadya mean an audience? The cops'll be all over us," exclaims the head eyebrow.

"No," interjects Martin, "not just any audience. We want the high stakes voyeurs—uh—I mean, the people who prefer to watch, but not the crazy ones that go to the dog fights. We want those flabby old grandpas sick of playing cards and board games down at the centre but too afraid to do anything else."

"Awright," says the preeminent eyebrow. "Say we hook a few of these old geesers. Tell 'em there's a street fight and they can see it, up-close and personal and all hush-hush. Whadda we charge 'em?"

"A Benjamin—er—a c-note per head," answers Martin as he moves his lower jaw and left and right. "Can't do this forever, you know."

"How do we split the money?"

"I was thinking 50-50."

"Whadya mean? There are six of us. Besides we can beat you to a pulp any day."

"Yeah, but you can't always make money doing it. And what if I started taking a different way home? Or turned you in to the police?"

"OK then. We take two-thirds, and you get a third."

"How about 60-40? You get 60 and I get 40. That's ten bucks apiece for every head in the crowd."

"Don't play me for a fool! I get forty. They can split the rest. You and me – we go 40-40."

"You're a natural aren't you? Your old man must be proud. How 'bout we do this Friday at 3:30? Can you be ready?"

"Should be able to get the uncles and some of their pals."

"Make sure they don't talk, alright? I ain't going to the cops and I don't want your boys going all soft and soppy and giving the cops a heads-up, OK?"

"Don't worry about me. You just be here when you said. And don't mess with me. If anything looks fishy we're outta here and you and me, we'll settle up later."

First published in Down in the Dirt, Volume 120, November/December 2013.

... just do it already [ed.]

He appreciates order. He never fails to notice the neatly-folded towels in the large marble-tiled bathroom, the down-turned tumblers on the writing desk facing the large picture window, and the unopened bottle of vintage Scotch whiskey. The room always smells the same—fresh but without the chemical odour.

He always stays in this room. It's his room on weekends near the end of each quarter. He never asks for another room, and he never asks for anything out of the ordinary. He eats in his room, he stays in his room, and he talks to no one other than the hotel desk clerk. He lives in his room. From high above the city, he follows the day's progress, he mostly just hears the TV that's always on, he reads his daily newspapers, and he works, usually until two or three o'clock in the morning, because he can't sleep until the bottle is half-finished.

He is always alone in his room. He is always alone except when he goes to the office. He always flies in on Fridays for the Monday morning briefings he gives to the executive management team, advising them on efficiency improvements and redundancy elimination. He does not let anything distract him. He insists on a private elevator and no contact below C-level on the organization chart.

He doesn't seem too much one way or the other. He doesn't smile or laugh or frown. He doesn't give compliments or sarcasm. He's indifferent to what others have to say, but they often fail to notice. He checks in as if it's the first time he's ever been in the hotel. He orders the same meals at the same

times and leaves the same tip, always as if he's doing it for the first time.

He is unremarkable in many other ways. But where his job is concerned he is truly remarkable. No one is even in his league. They say that he is really the one person responsible for the company's 20 consecutive years without a negative earnings report.

This weekend is like every other weekend for the past 80 quarters ... except for one thing. The briefing is scheduled for Monday afternoon.

Just like every previous weekend at quarter's end, he sits at the desk, going over his report, reviewing his calculations, and examining his assumptions. Hours pass, and well after the city lights have lit everything from below, the bottle empties and the papers lay undisturbed.

He's never opened the door to the balcony before. But tonight he carries his glass and bottle outside to sit and watch the city that he's only known from these heights. It's past three in the morning, and he's still sitting there, drinking, quietly.

At five-thirty on Monday morning, sirens converge on the hotel.

*First published in Black Lantern Publishing, Volume III,
Summer 2010.*

Dry Land

... when the waters recede [ed.]

Even after the 30-foot surge had receded, dry land didn't seem as demarcated and safe from the ocean as it once had.

When the ocean withdrew, it revealed a horrendous tangle of houses and cars, utility poles and wires, street signs and billboards, and 100-year-old oak trees stood like naked giants, though some were variously decorated with metal and plastic and mechanical debris.

We had persuaded her to evacuate. Her son had stayed behind—on guard—and had watched as the flood entered and filled the house, twisting and squeezing it.

For the next two years, everything seemed to get sucked down in a muddy sludge. Everyone was affected. The super-center sold antidepressants by the pound.

Her house was not covered, the insurance company told her—not for this kind of damage—so her son restored it, put it on the market, and got enough to pay off the bank. Afterwards he went away—quietly.

In the beginning, she stayed with us for a while, but soon after her cancer was diagnosed, she was back and forth between the hospital and a long term acute care centre before she ended up here in the hospice.

Today for the first time in days, she has opened her blueberry eyes wide to the purdy-purdy-purdy of a cardinal singing in the park across the street.

First published in Postcard Shorts, September 12, 2013.

... professional empathy [ed.]

It started sometime in my late forties. Things just set me off. Things that didn't bother me before now do. They're threatening, because they seem directed at me. It's as if I'm being singled out to be insulted everywhere I turn.

When I'm driving, it's other drivers. They cut me off or refuse to let me in. Their car horns scream at me, and the drivers make faces and gesture obscenely with their mouths wide open. When I'm a pedestrian, it's other pedestrians bumping into me, shoving me, shouting at me, tromping on my feet, or stepping on my heels. When I'm a client, the talking machines misdirect me and I wander into and out of dead ends until I finally fall through the administrative trap door. When I'm a customer, it's out of stock, not under warranty, or not available as advertised. When I'm a citizen, my email, telephone, and banking activities are under surveillance. When I'm at home, things just fall around me—a glass falls, bounces off the counter and crashes to the floor and among the glass shards is the medicine that I thought I had taken this morning.

This is all new for me—a change. I've changed, and while I sometimes wonder if the world—other people—is at fault, I feel like I can see myself becoming different. Occasionally now, I catch a glimpse of myself as if I were standing there beside myself, and I wonder how I became this stranger. It's common, so I've heard, that children fear growing up, fearing that they will become someone that they would find unpleasant, like a grown-up they know. I remember looking in the bathroom mirror when I was six-, seven-, or eight-years-old and imagining

whether I would like the person I was going to become in 20 years. Looking back, I'm sure I would have frightened myself.

My reactions are becoming wildly disproportionate to what triggered them. I do see that. I yell at the dog next door and scream at the neighbourhood kids and shout at the old man on the bicycle and swear at the call centre representative and break dishes and throw books and newspapers and slam the phone down and rip the mail to pieces. A very small part of my mind is conscious of what I'm doing, but it's not enough—

"Ok, Mr. Sightham. That's our time for today. We'll pick up here next week. Have a great day!"

First published on the Short Humour Site, 2009.

Tradition

... through the glass [ed.]

Penguins behind the glass.

Are they all alive? Some aren't even moving.

I think they're all alive. Some may be sleeping. I hear they can sleep standing up.

What do they do all day, when they aren't sleeping, I mean?

Just wobble around, jump in the water—they're good swimmers—squawk and flap and swallow fish whole. Not a bad life. Everything they need is here.

What do you think they think about?

Probably nothing much—food, play, maybe sex, if it's mating season.

Do they mind being watched?

No, they're simple. They don't have our sense of individual space and privacy.

I'd get so bored. Don't they get bored?

Wouldn't think so. They aren't as complex as we are. Their needs are very basic. If they were like us, this might seem like a prison, but they're not capable of feeling and thinking the kinds of things you worry about.

Have they ever been anywhere else? Is this the only world they know?

Yeah. This is it I imagine.

What's it like—to look out—every day—

#

on a sea of faces, wide-eyed and beakless, rounded flippers waving about, shrill, high-pitched shrieking and layers of unintelligible chatter punctuated with loud, boisterous squawking?

We have a famous ancestor who told a story about how we—not all penguins, just those of us who are now kept by humans—ended up in zoos, museums, and aquariums. None of us believed the story was completely true. There were many things that were beyond our imagination. It did, however, give us something in common. And our generation could only dream—and occasionally hope, because we only knew this place.

My close friends Zwakh-ah-ah-akh, Xipshch-Xipshch, Yeedoor-Ahh shared my hope of one day finding freedom, something that we'd never understood until Eck escaped. She was caught within minutes but not before she got a good look on the other side. Most of the flock was too terrified to ask what she saw, but we were curious. But Eck behaved strangely. She would stand for days at the glass wall, and she never spoke, even to us. And she never ate or slept either. One morning we woke up and she was gone.

After that we behaved differently during daylight hours. Well, not so differently that the humans would recognize any difference. We watched them carefully but not so they noticed. Humans get nervous and agitated when you stare at them for too long, like Eck used to do. So from reflections and sidelong looks we scanned the human herd for signs of understanding.

We wondered what they were thinking.

First published on the Short Humour Site, 2009.

Riding the Train

... why superficial politeness should not be scorned [ed.]

B: Kayla! Over here!

K: Brandon?

B: Hey, what's up? Whew, it's crowded in here. Last time I saw you was—Christopher's house party back in grade 12. Whatcha you been up to?

K: Thought I recognized you back in the parking lot. That your MX-5?

B: Yeah. My parents bought it for graduation. Not bad though. God, is it stale in here! No air in here yesterday either. Hey, still into the Blues? Me and Matthew Tornquist—you remember him—are driving to Chicago for the long weekend. We're gonna take in some clubs and do some sailing. His old man keeps a boat there for clients. Why are we stopping? Oh, sorry, let me move that for you. You're welcome. So rude, huh? Anyway, Saturday night there's a party at the Hancock Tower, and a lot of Blues and jazz musicians are gonna be there. You interested?

K: No way! That would be awesome! Like you know I love Chicago Blues, and Buddy Guy, maybe I can meet him. That would totally rock! Better get your ticket out. Conductor's coming. Matthew? Don't think I've met him, but didn't he have a sister, who, like, went crazy or something and ended up in a psycho hospital in New York?

B: Yeah, that's Nicole, but he doesn't like to talk about her, so I wouldn't go there.

K: Whatever! Everybody's got something, like, weird they don't wanna talk about. But that'd be awesome—I mean the trip. Were you taking your car?

B: No, gotta take it in. It's burning oil like crazy. Looks like we're moving again. But Matthew's got his Mom's 7-series. A little buttoned-down, but it's a ride, and it's got plenty of room, so, yeah, c'mon! Here's my number. Gimme a call.

K: Cool!

B: Great! So, what have you been up to?

K: Like, you know, school and stuff. I got into Queen's, but it was, like, suffocating there. I finished a year, then came home and Daddy helped me get a job until I find something else. I'm looking at McGill. Brandon, over there! A couple of empty seats. Move, quick! Yeah, I need a big city, more life, more people, more excitement, you know. Wanna spend more time on the slopes even though I can't compete anymore, and God, my French is horrible, and I'm going to Paris next summer. How about you? You're doing Philosophy, or Anthro-, er, Andrology, or something like that?

B: Philosophy. Definitely not Anthropology, if that's what you mean. Looks like we're stopping again. This is unbelievable. I usually take a later train. It's not as crowded and nowhere near the delays.

K: This is nothing. I'm usually standing the whole way, morning and afternoon.

B: Anyway, you know I'm still planning to go to law school. May even join the old man's firm, but that's down the road. For now, I'm just hanging out and reading Philosophy. May go to grad school later on. Mind-bending stuff, Philosophy. I mean really mind-bending. Now I see why so many Philosophy students end up as lawyers.

K: Wow! I'm impressed. You always did have it together. I'm still not sure. So many possibilities. I just can't, I mean, don't want to choose. Not yet anyway.

B: There's no pressure though, right? We're still young, and if we make a mistake, so what. Hey, I think Union's the next stop. About time! Besides, how can we explore if we don't experiment? It's like in this course I'm taking. You know, most people just live on the surface. They don't like to think—really think—about living. They just live, like the people on this train—on the train at 7:00 a.m. and off the train every day at 6:30 p.m., if they're lucky. How many of them do you think really think about Philosophy and language and how much it shapes their little everyday lives? Just think what happens when we get lazy, or busy, some people like to say, and we let our language get sloppy and say things we don't mean or that aren't true, like, "how are you?" or "have a good day" or "everything's fine." It's really just so hypocritical, you know, and meaningless. Words don't mean what they should, and our thoughts become shallow—

K: Hmm. Sounds interesting. I think I see what you're saying, but, like, isn't there something missing. I mean, if I say "how are you?" to someone, won't he be polite back? OK, he

may not care, and same for me, but at least we'll be polite, don't you think? Maybe it's dishonest and super-, er, shallow, but isn't it, like, better than, uh, rudeness and getting in your face? And as long as the ride is smooth and you get where you're going, who cares, right?

Conductor (shouting over the PA system): Union Station, this stop. Union Station. This is the final stop for this train. Again, we would like to apologize for the delays and any inconvenience they may have caused. Have a nice day—and please watch your step.

First published in Down in the Dirt, Volume 129, May/June 2015.

The Talking Stick

... trivializing cultural artifacts can be dangerous [ed.]

My first teaching job was in an inner city school. It was pretty uneventful until the day I introduced the talking stick.

It was a nice stick. It had some sort of animal hide wrapped tightly at either end and a single large white eagle feather fastened to a colourful array of beads halfway up. I had picked it up at a souvenir stand in New Mexico on a road trip back when I was in college.

I had completely forgotten about it until I got into ESL teaching. Everybody I met taught the Native American talking stick. At first I thought it was just plain hokey. But students were fascinated by the back story, and the behavioural effects were said to be extraordinary. Best of all, it was foolproof to teach.

So, when I brought my old talking stick into class one bright winter morning, having refitted it with a beautiful Blue Jay feather from the park next door, I was filled with a surge of new teacher enthusiasm.

It was going swimmingly at first. We had a full class of 19 students, and it was very crowded but still cold, because the radiator heating in our old building couldn't keep up with the cold air leaking in.

Simulating a council meeting, the students were discussing a hypothetical power plant project for our community, and it was about evenly split between supporters and opponents. The talking stick was regulating the debate. It was turning out just as I had imagined.

Then, one of the students tripped and fell over a desk and banged another student on the head with the talking stick. Blood trickled. The hit student scrambled to her feet, grabbed the talking stick and swung it at what she thought was her attacker. That's the last I remember distinctly, because chairs and desks and books and handbags and coats flew about the classroom for the longest three-and-a-half minutes I've ever seen.

When the principal and school security rushed into the classroom to restore order, three students lay tangled in the tumble of chair legs and desk tops and two were slumped over their desks. The talking stick lay broken and bloody on the floor at my feet, while the lovely blue feather with its black bar markings, having come loose during the debate, had settled unruffled onto one of the upright desks.

First published in Daily Flash 2011: 365 Days of Flash Fiction.

My Undivided Attention

... ever talked to yourself like this? [ed.]

"Alright, straighten up! Eyes to the front. Lose the smile. Matter of fact, remember. Stop fidgeting. Be still. Watch, listen, wait, just like we rehearsed."

"F___in' automaton. Think this is gonna go somewhere?"

"Yeah, if you'll shut up. And stay out of the way. We had an agreement, so cut it out with the tantrums. You just can't follow through with anything can you?"

"F___ you! It's you that's always getting us into these holes, and then you blame me."

"That's enough. And get that nose hair. It's distracting."

"Owww!"

"We can't stand here all day. Besides, you'd have cut your nose off if you'd used scissors.... Where was I?"

"Indispensable ass-istance' you said."

"No I didn't. But you're right I don't want to come across like a—"

"Why not? That's how it always ends up."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Quiet knocking on the door.

"Just a minute— Oh, did you pick up my shoes?"

"No Daddy."

"I'm sorry little man, I thought you were Mommy. Go tell Mommy I need my lucky shoes and I'll be ready in 5 minutes."

"Ok Daddy. Can I watch you shave?"

"Not today. Daddy's in a hurry."

Sound of a little boy calling his mother gets fainter.

"Shouldn't always be ignoring him, you know. He's a good kid, and he doesn't have to turn out like you."

"Well, maybe that won't be so bad as you're always saying. Look, I'll never quit trying, and if you'd just pull yourself together, maybe we could get somewhere."

"So now you're the optimist, huh? That's not how you were talking last night. Remember what you said?"

"Give me a break. I'd had too much to drink and I was alone, which means I was in your lousy company, and you do bring out the worst in me."

"That's some memory you got. Guess you forgot it was me that reminded you of your wife and kid while you were mourning your life away."

"Ok, I appreciate that. But why can't you always be there? Like right now?"

"I am. I'm there all the time. But you know I can't be there the way you want. Last Christmas, the Holiday Inn at the airport. I was there, wasn't I?"

Sound of water overflowing.

"Sweetie, is everything ok in there? We have to go if you want to catch the next train. I put your shoes at the foot of the bed."

Knocking on the door.

"Yeah, alright. We'll, er, I'll be right out. Uh, honey, could you find the tie you gave me last Christmas?"

First published in The Calliope Nerve, January 20, 2010.

The Letter

... don't knock hoarding [ed.]

My sister wrote last week. I always enjoy her letters. She has a gift for understating things. When the hurricane hit, her house "suffered some serious damage." It was washed away. She was like that as a kid, too. I remember she broke her hand in the 3rd or 4th grade, and before a week was up she was writing with the other hand and showing off her pink cast.

She's a sport. Actually, she didn't write much this time, just "Here, found this in Liviabel's papers, and thought you might get a kick out of it." Inside was a 4x6 envelope, brittle and yellowed around the edges.

Couldn't figure it out at first. Why was she sending me this? The envelope was addressed in large block letters to Mr. Santa, and the 5-cent stamp was even cancelled. On the other side a week's worth of names in 3 columns—morning, afternoon, evening. The names were familiar, and it was definitely my father's writing, virtually unreadable to anyone but family.

Ainsworth, Huggins, Lawley, Rosen, Whitaker—first these, then the rest came back to me like a gust. These were folks my father used to visit long ago, before he got retired. Some of the names I didn't recognize, but those might have been from the nearby hospital or local jail.

And this was how the old man spent his time and why he never had time to play baseball or football and even missed dinner sometimes and forgot Momma's birthday once and wouldn't take us to the Gulf one summer and—

My resentment and bitterness were all coming back. It didn't matter that I couldn't remember whether I got the bicycle or the Indian or the baseball cards. I probably did. It wasn't about stuff. It was about what was really important to him. For years I'd blamed him, and everyone thought I was scapegoating him like a jealous child, but now I had evidence. It wasn't just in my head.

I mean! Just imagine, an innocent little kid, 6 or 7, writes a cute little letter to Santa—probably the last year I actually believed in Santa Claus—and the old man takes the envelope and on the back scribbles down his schedule for the next week, which I bet was Christmas week, because work always came first and everything was always about work.

But—I can't see why he saved it. That wasn't like him. Ahhh yeah! It wasn't him. It was Momma. She saved it just like she saved all our stuff. He couldn't have been bothered. Too busy. Places to go, people to see. Everybody wanting his attention and getting it—at my expense.

Why did she send this? It isn't helpful at all. Only stirs up bad feelings. Don't know what she must have been thinking. I don't throw anything away anymore, but this sure came close.

"Hey, Stokes, I mean, Mr. Stokes. Has the Reverend been by yet? It's not like him to be late. You'll let me know? Thanks."

*First published in Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal,
Volume #32 October-December 2010*

The Uncle

... are heritage moments apocryphal, too? [ed.]

"No full, accurate, and unprejudiced history
of the war has ever been written." George Lewis

Professor Lewis, in his new book, *The Inland War of 1812*, claims to have authenticated what many military historians now consider irrefutable evidence that Mrs. Laura Secord was not in fact the messenger who alerted Lieutenant James FitzGibbon to the American assault on the British depot at DeCew House. In an extraordinary find, Professor Lewis has uncovered the handwritten and signed confession of Mrs. Secord's uncle dated 22 June 1813, which proves that he, not she, saved the British. While her motives were honourable, unlike his, the military value of her famous trek in defence of the Loyalist community was nil. This is the essence of Professor Lewis' latest research.

The record of Mrs. Secord's uncle has excited much controversy. Some claim there was no such person, others that he was Mrs. Secord's self-appointed guardian and neighbour, newly arrived from Massachusetts. Professor Lewis' discovery suggests not only that Mrs. Secord's uncle was real but that it was he who, albeit indirectly, warned FitzGibbon by means of a confession that was undoubtedly extracted through torture, a common enough practise at that time. The legend of Mrs. Secord and her 30-kilometre journey through the wilds of 19th century Niagara has always rested on uncorroborated evidence and this latest piece of historical evidence will undeniably further diminish her standing among historians. However, what is most damning to the legacy of Mrs. Secord are the alleged facts that her uncle was a collaborator and that it was a trea-

sonous opportunist and not a courageous heroine who warned FitzGibbon and foiled the American attack.

Professor Lewis generously devotes a full four paragraphs on pages 45 and 47 to recount his revised history, weaving this new colourful thread into the traditional tale of Mrs. Secord.

On the evening of June 21, 1813, three American officers arrived at Laura's house and demanded dinner, so she served them. During the evening, she overheard Lieutenant Colonel Charles Boerstler's plans, and before daybreak, she set out alone to warn the British. Just a few hours after she had left, her uncle came by to pay a visit to his niece and her husband, James, who had been wounded and left flat on his back since the Battle of Queenston Heights. Upon learning that Laura had gone to deliver information that could upset the planned attack on DeCew House, her uncle upbraided James, reminding him that the American sentries posted all around Queenston and the Indians and British guerrillas in the wilderness beyond were all of them capable of much violence, especially to a woman travelling alone. Of course he could not have told James the real reason for his concern. But in his confession, he reveals that he believed an American victory would virtually assure the American annexation of the Niagara Peninsula and richly reward any Loyalist who had switched sides.

It was late afternoon on June 22nd and he had been following his niece for 12 miles, and now, through the worn soles of his boots, he could feel Black Swamp oozing between his toes. He knew that Laura would be coming this way and avoiding the high ground of the escarpment. It was dangerous country,

filled with sharp rocks and rattlesnakes, and unless one was an Indian or a scout, one moved slowly and fearfully. She could not have been too far ahead. In a clearing, he stopped, hearing a familiar whirring. As he reached for his musket, an arrow went through his right shoulder and the gun dropped to the ground at his feet. It was an old trick. The Indian scouting party surrounded him. Unable to make himself understood, he was treated like an enemy prisoner, robbed of his possessions, and stripped of his clothes.

At the Indian camp, he most likely did not know who his captors were, since he was not knowledgeable beyond the towns and outlying farms. Based on historical evidence from the period and place, he was likely questioned then tortured to find out what a townsperson like himself was doing in the wilderness all alone. An analysis of his handwriting appears to confirm that he was tortured. There is a jerkiness and intensity in his penmanship that has been noted in other torture cases. The torture was successful, as we now know from the confession. Once he had given up the American plan and his own effort to stop Laura from delivering the warning, an Indian messenger rode off to warn the British. Late in the evening, FitzGibbon received the warning and prepared an ambush for Boerstler and the Americans in a densely wooded area on the Niagara Escarpment.

The following morning, the day of the planned attack, Laura was captured by Indian scouts, but her insistence on speaking directly with FitzGibbon persuaded them to take her to him without harm. FitzGibbon listened to Laura and thanked her, but he did not say that he already knew about the surprise attack. Later that day, on June 23rd, the Americans were routed at Beaverdams by Mohawk warriors flank-

ing the trail on the ridge of the Niagara Escarpment. The ambush was planned so well that FitzGibbon's guerrillas reportedly never had to fire a shot. They had only to guarantee the Americans that if they surrendered they would not be scalped.

In Canada, Mrs. Secord has long been recognised as a heroine of the resistance during the War of 1812, but until now her uncle's treason had never been known. His body was never recovered. His name does not appear in any previous accounts of the battles around this time, and only now has it surfaced in this particular episode of the war. Professor Lewis speculates that the confession may have been suppressed in order to keep a traitor hidden and to protect a heroine's feat—"an inexcusable act of biased scholarship" as the American historian has put it.

First published in The Copperfield Review, Volume 9, Number 2, Spring 2010.

A Strange Bed

... worse than any nightmare [ed.]

Tina woke up in a strange bed—alone. The bed was firmer than hers, but it was warm and comfortable. On the opposite wall, two oil portraits flanked a cumbrous television on top of a wide, low dresser. No mirror. The blinds on the window were closed. It was quiet. But it smelled good—like her grandmother's freshly washed linen.

Her throat was dry and she reached for a plastic water bottle, but there was only an empty glass tumbler with an upside down toothbrush in it. She started at that. On the other bedside table were pills of various shapes and colours, pigeonholed by day of the week in a plastic dispenser. There was water, a pitcher of it with ice cubes and a small fruit juice glass on a doily.

Lifting herself so that she could better take stock of what was going on around her, she felt stiff in every part of her body she could name. She filled a glass and drank it too quickly. The cold water seized her throat and put her into a coughing fit.

Finally relaxed, her breathing returned to normal, and she dried her eyes with a Kleenex.

She couldn't see well without her glasses, but she couldn't remember where she'd left them. So, scrunching up her eyes, she gazed around the room and fixed on the portraits. Leaning forward as far as her body would let her, she studied them. The woman looked like her mother, but her mother never sat for a painting. And the man? Oh my! That's German, but he must be 50 years old in that portrait. She raised her right hand in front of

her face. Loose skin, liver spots, and blue veins stared back no matter how hard she squinted and shifted her head to find a true view.

First published in 6 Tales, December 2011.

... not the nectar of the gods surely? [ed.]

“Soma, capsules or tablets, on sale, \$99 a pound.” I really saw this in a store—one of those high volume members-only discount stores. I was with a friend. An anti-depressant with a literary pedigree at bulk prices. Unbelievable! That was my first reaction.

“What’s with this? This is prescription medicine. How can they do this?”

“You still have to have a doctor’s prescription, but it’s open. Your doctor can prescribe as many pills as you want. We’re in a special economic zone, you know, so things are a little different.”

“Yeah, but are there really so many people who feel this kind of bottomless depression?”

“Hard to say. This was one of the first things that changed after the flood.”

“You mean they’re sedating people who’ve lost everything?”

“That was what some of us thought at first. But there was a devastating flood in China right about the same time, and though it didn’t get the coverage that we got, there were regular reports of suicides—not just a few ... hundreds.”

“So, they were sedating people?”

“Like I said, that’s what we thought. But there was a side effect.”

“One Flew over the Cuckoo—”

“Hyperaggression!”

“That bad? I mean people lost—“

“Worse than you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it! You lose your house. Your job. Your kids. There is nothing else to lose. And now this drug puts you right out there on the edge.”

“Suicide?”

“No! Aren’t you paying attention? Murder!”

“Murder? But I haven’t—“

“Of course you haven’t heard. They’re still recovering bodies from the flood.”

“But surely they can tell the difference?”

“Hm.”

“Can’t they?”

“Uh, yeah, yeah I guess they can. Listen, let’s go, I’m getting light-headed. Ever since the storm.”

“Sure. Let’s pick up some fast food and take it back to the armoury.”

“Ok, but I need to go back to the house this afternoon.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No! I mean, no thanks, I’d rather be alone.”

He was downright rude I thought. Must be the side effect he was talking about. That was my second reaction.

First published in Daily Flash 2012: 366 Days of Flash Fiction.

The Obits

... to be blinded by hate [ed.]

It was a mistake, but who among us ...? Anyway, now I'm reading the obits. That's how I get even. My granddaddy, grandma, and my old man—what a useless bag of wind he was—used to go through the obits in between games of canasta on the side porch with whoever they could drag in as a fourth. You know, it is kinda satisfying to see when you've outlived someone you knew your whole life. And, God, what a pleasure to read the obit of someone you hated, like Arthur Sanders. What a two-faced son of a— Bastard put me in retirement 10 years early. Said I had a drinking problem. "Well, how do you like that Mr. Sanders, sir?" Dog days, last summer ... well now ... that was the jackpot. The Reverend Milligan and Miss 'Prissy' Ducharme in the same edition. Got caught out, didn't they now? And by God, no less. For all those lies they told. God's justice I'd say, ruining my reputation, scaring kids. "Well, last laugh's on you isn't it now? Heard the gravediggers wanted to put you in the same hole, so they'd finish early." What a hoot! Almost up there with when J. Everett Singletary III's cremated remains got mixed up at the funeral parlor. They say widow Blankenship's 'Peaches' is still on the mantle at Singletary House. But today's just a waste of 50 cents. Only one obit. Nobody I know. Just this little kid, not even four years old. What a shame! Says he died two days ago. Hit by a car. What was he doing in the road for God's sake? Where was his mother? God Almighty! Couldn't be! No! That little curly-haired boy—brown eyes big as copper pennies—waddling out into the road after a— But I swear I saw him moving!

First published in Daily Flash 2012: 366 Days of Flash Fiction.

... community living is not what it's cracked up to be [ed.]

How much more can there be? Uninterrupted visual stimulation all day long, some days. That's if we can trust this neurological chronometer implant. On those days, no shadows, no colours, no shapes; no rest from the all-enveloping whiteness.

On other days, shrill, harsh tones dizzy our hearing, but we have no sight, no smell or taste or feeling on these days. Each day gives us only a single sense. The others are shut down.

Except for those days when every nerve tip is ignited, and all the senses are awakened for a split second, then shut off, then switched back on, over and over again. And so on, for days or maybe weeks. Long enough that we seem to have lost track of much of what is happening to us.

Where isn't known to us. Only what is allowed can be seen or heard by us, and only then on sight days or hearing days. There's nothing to smell on smell days but a noxious odour, but we can't cough or hold our breath. Taste days make us crave something salty or sweet, but we don't eat anymore. We try not to feel.

Who is behind this, we don't know. He or she or they or it might only be in our heads. But are we really real or is someone thinking us? Memory and imagination are useable, but mostly we don't know which is which.

Before there was one among us who described things that he said he really saw or felt or heard. He wasn't convincing

though. He was with us for a while, but he's not here any longer.

He told us that he couldn't feel anything but his feet and that they always felt wet, and then he said he saw them in a clear plastic tank on the table opposite. That shocked us, because we couldn't feel or see any of this—not wet feet or tanks or tables or rooms or buildings.

Before— Before what? Earlier. Earlier there had been a splash. An impact and the sound of us dropping heavily into water. The jarring we felt throughout. But we didn't see a thing. And then we floated to the top and stayed there, rising and falling until the water calmed.

Before the splash, a buzzing, grinding, vibrating, sticky, bloody procedure removed us from the skull.

Prior to the extraction, we lost control of our muscles, and our heart raced while our limbs jerked and flopped. The needle helped, but we were still awake—inside.

Before the needle, a squeaky hospital gurney carried us to the operating room.

Previously, we had been put in an empty room with no windows and not even an outline of the door.

There was another room before that with a chair and a table and on the table a pen and paper and our signature at the bottom.

Prior to the signature was the lecture hall filled with 200 students taking Professor Smartt's course in the Philosophy of Mind. The topic that day was Putnam's brain in the vat.

It all began with a posting on craigslist. "Students needed for pioneering multidisciplinary experiments into multiple personality disorders. Tuition fully paid on completion."

First published in Danse Macabre Issue, Vol. 6, No. 7, September 2011.

In the Progressive

... just one continuous thread, but don't pull it [ed.]

Standing on the edge of the building around twilight was a man. He winced.

An hour earlier, he was walking up the last flight of stairs to the roof.

In Room 714 half-an-hour before that, he was reading a letter that had been hand-delivered to the front desk.

Sometime between 2:00 and 4:00 that morning, some marauding kids were stripping down his car in the parking lot down the street.

A few hours before that he was being mugged while leaving the bar around the corner.

Two-and-a-half hours before that, he was moving into a dilapidated hotel near the mission, having just been released.

He was rampaging through the apartment a couple of hours earlier when the police arrived and took him into custody.

Around 5:30, the bartender was refusing to serve him any more drinks.

Twenty-six hours and seven minutes ago, he was being pink slipped and escorted off the floor where he was working moments before.

#

I am making an early dinner for the boys when the call comes. He never could stick with anything. Drinking more than we could afford, turning up drunk for work, or phoning in sick with that slurred speech and foul mouth of his. I am thinking this may be the end, wondering how we're going to make rent.

The boys are finally asleep, and I'm swearing that this'll be the last time he'll ever take it out on me like that. I say that every time, I know. But for sure next time, I'm calling the cops on the bastard soon as I see him at the door.

First thing in the morning and the super is banging on the door and shouting that the landlord is evicting us.

Mid-morning, thanks to that good-for-nothing piece of ___, I'm phoning around trying to find something better than one of those hell holes for women beaten by men.

Just before noon, someone from the police department is calling and talking about a car, registered to this address, that's been found vandalized in a downtown parking lot. I'm not worrying about this right now, and I'm telling them over and over to tow, impound it, or whatever for all I care—it's not mine!

Early in the afternoon—the boys are safe in school and are going over to a friend's afterwards—the hotel desk clerk is telling me that the man got beaten pretty badly. Good's what I say ... under my breath. I mean it's not like he didn't have it coming. Besides, he didn't even go to hospital!

A few hours later—must've been around 4:30—I'm standing at the hotel front desk, and I'm asking the desk clerk if he's seen him.

Half-an-hour later, I'm sitting in a nearby bakery, watching from diagonally across the street, and waiting for him to show up and get the letter I left.

About seven or seven-thirty, I am following him up the last flight of stairs to the roof, and my heart is racing.

I am walking up behind him to the edge of the roof where he is looking down into the streets now emptied of cars rushing out of the city.

I am standing behind him, and I am pushing the gun hard into his right kidney.

First published in The Calliope Nerve, June 11, 2010.

The Garbage Audit

... what our garbage says about us and leaves unsaid [ed.]

Standing in the middle of a pile of garbage, he lays the clipboard on the floor and begins sorting.

Metal filings mixed with dirt and dust, twisted duct tape, rolled up sections of yesterday's paper, shims broken and splintered, disposable blue latex gloves, oily red rags, safety glasses with a lens missing, candy wrappers and empty chip bags, some rusted-out metal screws, an incisor chipped on the corner, dozens of yellow earplugs on blue strings—

At the temp agency, they said he'd be sorting recyclable material in a plant and to show up at 8:00 the next morning. "Just ask someone if you don't know. And don't forget to get your timesheet in if you want your cheque next week."

—a tangle of black electrical tape, a shrivelled blackened banana peel, a blood-stained tube sock, water bottles, clumps of reddish hair, dust masks torn and smudged, a couple of Coke cans, a foot from an aluminum ladder, a melon-sized mass of mucous-clotted tissue, some apple cores—

The blue shirts had ribbed him in the lunchroom just before the shift started, teasing him with names like garbage collector, litterbug, CSI wannabe, and maggot mate.

—a few soiled Band-Aids, coffee cups with the rims rolled up, some orange rinds, a used condom, a work boot with a nail clean through the heel, and a half-used roll of safety tape.

One of the old guys—wrinkled and leathery-faced but queerly futuristic with his safety yellow ear protectors pushed up and looking like they might be permanent—had come over to join him.

“Don’t mind them,” he said nodding in their direction. “They’re just blowing off steam what with shutdown coming next week. Every year around this time—at least for the last five anyway—the company does what they call an eco-assessment. It’s a one-day garbage audit—what you’ll be doing. Ain’t nothing to do with the environment. Pure PR. See those plaques over there next to the Coke machine. That’s one of the stops they make when a tour—“

A loud buzzer interrupted everything and everyone on cue, and a swarm of blue funnelled through the double doors. The supervisor came up to him as the buzzer was silenced and walked him into the plant and over to a large roll-up door in receiving.

“It’s pretty straightforward,” said the supervisor, looking past him. “All you have to do is sort through and count up the paper, the plastics, the glass, and any non-recyclable materials. All yesterday’s garbage, including night shift’s—what you’re standing in right now—has been numbered and put on plastic sheeting here. But don’t worry. There won’t be any trucks today.”

“Oh,” said the supervisor who was turning to walk away, “you get two breaks and a half-an-hour lunch. Just follow the guys. Any questions, make sure you ask, OK?”

He watched the supervisor walk away, and then turned back to the garbage pile. With his boot he moves the clipboard a few feet further away. Sifting through the waste, creating smaller piles, he pokes at a rolled up piece of clothing at the bottom of the pile and lifts it with his garbage wand. Holding up a blood-soaked white t-shirt, he looks around to see if anyone else saw the ring drop onto the plastic.

First published in The Fringe Magazine, August 2011.

The Meeting

... the dreams of a bottom feeder [ed.]

It took place every Wednesday afternoon at three-thirty in the 12th floor boardroom. Everyone had meetings, but this one was different. It had been going on for four years.

Sitting in the middle at the long table, her back to the window, was the former director of human resources, a bookish face framed by too-red hair, retired after 35 years and now a consultant, who never understood why no one showed up for her retirement party.

On her left was the very large and athletic interim project director who had been recruited for his precisely-articulated and intricately-ordered plans, but who routinely failed to secure budget commitments and never managed to build his team beyond one.

Opposite was the former interim project director, now senior advisor emeritus, a short but distinguished raconteur and pitchman with a familiar and sometimes risqué repertoire, whose self-promotion and calculated liaisons had always ensured his place at the table.

To his left was the self-described American dissident who had evaded an earlier Asian war but whose alleged anti-establishment views were embarrassingly incongruous with his corporate outlook as financial comptroller.

Next to the consultant, at the far end of the table, was the balding but still young and very ambitious senior VP for sales

and marketing whose only fault seems to have been an attentiveness that vacillated between the cloying and the random.

At the other end of the table was the chief of technology, the legacy of an ancient merger, whose occasional outbursts, always irrelevant and mostly unintelligible, were tolerated, but just barely, by his brother-in-law, the chairman.

Opposite him at the head of the table sat the chairman, a tall impeccably-dressed man of middle age, who had directed the last 199 meetings. His secretary was absent, so there were no refreshments, and there was no one to take the minutes, not that anyone ever did. Following protocol, the chairman greeted each member, proceeding by rank, and then he stood up, excused himself, and walked to the door.

When he opened the door, a security detail of 12 poured into the room and escorted the other six out to the elevator lobby. In the lobby, the chairman, without a word or gesture, handed each an envelope.

After the elevator had taken the last group down, the chairman walked back into the meeting room, sat down, and looked straight ahead. Then came the three knocks on the door.

First published on the Short Humour Site, 2011.

Top of the Food Chain

... but a logical extreme? [ed.]

“Allison, did you remember to leave food out for Mrs. Easom so she can feed your creatures and that lizard?” Mother was using a mirror to guide the tweezers across her forehead.

“He’s not a lizard. He’s a gecko,” declared eleven-year-old Allison, “and, of course, I left out food—and feeding instructions. You know I don’t forget things like that.”

“Looks awfully like a lizard to me,” replied Mother, “but you’re right, dear. He’s a gecko. And I’m sure Mrs. Easom will be able to figure everything out.”

“Ok you two,” interrupted Daddy, changing lanes to pass a truck. “We’ve got 1603 miles to go before we get to the Grand Canyon, so you might as well settle down and enjoy the ride.”

“Alright Daddy, but you know how she provokes me.” Turning up the volume on her iPod, she pressed her face against the window.

“I’m sorry Allison” said Mother over her left shoulder. “I didn’t mean to provoke you. I just wanted— Here, let’s turn on the radio.”

“Good idea. Weekend Edition should be on.” He pressed one of the preset buttons and adjusted the volume for front and back.

“Oh my God,” sighed Allison.

The truck they were passing was carrying pigs—an upper and a lower level. The pigs were mashed up against sides of the trailer, and as her father pulled beside the truck, Allison could see the pink snouts, the floppy ears, even a curly tail poking through the metal slats, and the big, deep eyes.

“Oh, God!” cried Allison, losing an earbud as she jerked away from the window. “How horrible! I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“What’s wrong honey?” asked Daddy.

“Just a truck carrying animals to the slaughterhouse,” said Mother with a wink, which Allison didn’t see.

“Mother! How can you say things like that?” shrieked Allison.

“It’s just part of life, dear. I know how you feel about the zoo and eating meat and all that, but it’s nature. It’s natural. There’s nothing wrong with it.” Mother was getting fidgety and her stomach rumbled.

“Mother’s right, Allison,” said Daddy. “We’re at the top of the food chain, so every living thing below us that can be eaten is on the menu, so to speak.”

“Daddy! You, too? You’re both so—I don’t know, cruel. I can’t believe it. You’re different. Don’t you have any compassion?” Allison sobbed into her pillow.

“No dear,” answered Mother. “It’s not right or wrong. It’s just necessary, and, I’m sorry Allison, but I didn’t have break-

fast, and I'm getting a little peckish. Daddy, let's pull into that rest area ahead."

Daddy pulled into the shady spot at some distance from the facilities. Before Allison could unbuckle her seatbelt and jump out, Mother turned around and plucked off the little girl's head and popped it into her suddenly cavernous mouth.

"What'd you have to do that for?" yelled Daddy, his gargantuan green, wart-covered head now halfway through the roof. "You're so impulsive! Besides, you know it's my favourite part."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now who needs to relax?" said Mother. "You got the last one, remember? And don't forget, you got to drive first."

"But it wasn't even ripe yet," protested Daddy, "and she was such good company."

"Get over it!" snorted Mother. "We'll pick up something on the way. Now do something about your appearance. You look dreadful."

First published in Flashes in the Dark, April 26, 2011.

... overworked and time-disoriented [ed.]

It's still dark. Seven by the dashboard clock. But that's nine minutes fast.

Engine idling high and the windows mostly clear, he takes a deep breath and shifts into reverse, zipping backwards down the driveway and crunching through the wake of snow and ice left by the plow.

Thank God, no one is coming, because that spin landed him facing the wrong way, and he needs a five-point turn to get right.

That's a minute gone, and the train leaves at 6:55. On dry roads, it's an easy five-minute drive, but—

Steering with his knees as he struggles with the seat belt, he speeds down the snow-covered streets, dodging overturned blue and green recycling boxes, sloshing hot coffee in his lap, and flinging papers from his briefcase all over the backseat.

Under the circumstances, stop means rolling stop, and a red light means yield.

The station is still three minutes away, but it's 6:53. A long stretch of nearly empty road makes it possible to drive twice the speed limit.

The second-last red light is the one that worries him. Thank God there's nobody here! A stealthy left on red gets him through the light and into the final stretch. It's 6:55 and the

parking lot is almost empty. Running and slipping and sliding through the front door of the train station and up the escalator to Platform 3, he's made it with no broken bones or ripped trousers.

Through the loudspeakers, a crackly voice announces that the next train will be delayed 20 minutes. Out of the cold in a glass-enclosed shelter, he pulls his cell out and leaves a message at the office.

Looking off to the east where the sun should be rising soon, he tries to make conversation with the attractive young woman next to him, remarking how he hates this time of year because of the short days. Leaning in to hear her reply, he sees she's talking on her cell, so he apologizes but freezes when she says "Good night."

First published in Clever Magazine, Summer 2013.

... a clear case of it [ed.]

The coffee was cold. One side of the glass coffee table was littered with letters meticulously torn from the folded newspaper. In the midst of the abecedarian jumble was the word 'labyrinth' in the past tense—'labyrinthined.'

Two bald heads reflected the overdone fluorescent lighting. The younger wore frameless glasses, while the other, his eyes squeezed into slits when looking down at his notebook, should have.

"It's not a word, you know, but I think it should be," said the younger one. "To labyrinth—to arrange things in a spatiotemporal puzzle so that others must figure out or stumble on the hidden meaning. Labyrinth, labyrinthine, maybe labyrinthinely, as in 'He labyrinthinely constructed an alternative scenario—"

The older one wrote the word 'labyrinthined' and underlined it with two strokes. Looking up, his eyelids separated, and he nodded for the other to proceed.

"In high school we mooned and lettered. My parents radiod and telephoned. In grammar school we bused and rocketed, and now we google and text and tweet, so why not labyrinth? English is a bastard language—etymologically deficient—so what do I care about linguistic niceties?"

"And do you feel that other people understand you?" answered the older flaccid bald head.

"Do you?" asked the bespectacled bald head.

"Do you want me to understand you—I mean, what would you like me to know about you?" answered the older, wrinkled head, his eyelids rolled down again, as he readied to make notes.

"This is what I mean. Being labyrinthesized. That's what's happening to me. Don't you understand?"

"I'd like to understand. Can you tell me what you're feeling, right now, for example?"

"Did you know that in one of the uncivilized regions of equatorial Tlon they don't even have the concept of person? No way to distinguish between you and me or me now and me five years ago. It's fascinating but I can't really imagine it for more than a few minutes at a time. It's like I'm programmed to see the world one way. Do you know what I mean?"

"And how does that make you feel?"

"That's an irritating habit you have, you know?"

"Could you describe what it is that you find irritating?"

"When you describe someone—like me, for example, in your notebooks—would you say that you understand me?"

"Well, there are important differences. Description is just part of understanding. There's also causality."

"And identity?"

"I suppose, yes, identity is fundamental."

"So, if you got that wrong, you'd have everything wrong, right?"

"Uh, let's get back to—what are you're feeling? Could you describe that for me?

"That's not the question you should be asking. It doesn't matter what I feel. Don't you get it? What matters is that I'm not your patient. Your patient is gone. Meanwhile, you and I have been labyrinthed—swallowed up by something that is still incomprehensible, notwithstanding our paradigms and languages. I can't make it any more clear."

"Hmm. It may be frustrating trying to explain, but don't give up," said the other, his wrinkles doubling up as he opened his eyes wide, closing his notebook decisively. "I think we made some real progress today, so how about we pick up here next week?"

First published in The Bicycle Review Issue #10, February 15, 2011.

'Risotto

... an Escheresque dream sequence [ed.]

I dreamt us again last night—Otto and me. It didn't seem out of the ordinary that we were sitting at the back of a crowded airplane. The pilot had just announced that we would be landing in a few minutes. I heard myself calling, *Where's Otto? 'RisOtto, here boy*, to get him to come and lie down. Otto was enjoying the attentions of a chubby young boy and his anemic older sister a couple of rows in front. He never passed up a chance to be noticed and appreciated, and that's why he wasn't listening to me.

As I reached out to grab him by the collar in order to pull him over to me, the collar slipped over his head, and he was sucked out the door at the back of the plane. Strange. It didn't even occur to me at the time to wonder why the door was wide open. I watched myself hesitate, then jump out the door, and then improbably land right beside him.

Gathered up in my arms, he didn't feel so heavy anymore. He lay motionless, until he began gurgling and coughing—not blood but water. In no time, I saw us limping across the runway past the cargo handlers and maintenance workers who mostly cheered; though some wagged their fingers or shouted mean things. Inside the terminal, we quickly became invisible in the waves of arrivals and departures.

Long, diagonal corridors, bounded on both sides by small, colourful shops selling newspapers and magazines, laptops and plasma TVs, souvenir shirts, fashion gowns, books, and sofas connected the terminal's multilayered sections. None of this appeared odd — just incidental. As I watched us moving

through the busyness, it seemed that everything around us had been staged.

Once outside in a nearby wooded park, a dozen or more happy, playful dogs greeted Otto and me. He was back in his world—back where he was meant to be—and I looked so very happy that he was happy, again. He ran fast and hard, wearing his big, goofy dog smile as he led the pack round and round the park. He ran so fast, I couldn't even tell that he was running on only three legs.

Then, darkness came quickly and caught me by surprise. Otto had disappeared down a square spiral of concrete steps, which led to a deep tunnel under the freeway. I heard '*Risotto!*' being called down into the tunnel. I heard '*Risotto!*' '*Risotto!*' echoing back from the emptiness below, and again, I would relive not finding Otto.

First published in Apocrypha and Abstractions, Issue 21, Volume II, January 28, 2013.

The Walled City

... can walls be lowered? [ed.]

What I did on my summer vacation.

#

It was just a weekend trip—just the four of us, my parents, my brother, and me. We almost missed our flight. My stupid brother set off the security alarms—he didn’t empty his pockets—and was taken aside, patted down, and questioned. Mom cried. Dad stood out of the way with his hands in his pockets. Turns out they were just training a new guy.

When we dropped below the clouds, there it was, built on a cliff, overlooking a river. Mom read about it in the airline magazine they keep next to the barf bags. She described a lower and upper town, watched over by a towering fort. The skyline of the city was dominated by spires and steeples and bell towers—no glass, steel or anything modern. This place was centuries old.

She also told us—she alone loved history—that after the wars, the inhabitants came to feel the upper town had become like a prison, so they lowered the walls—from 10 feet to two feet. Behind the walls, the history, architecture, food, music, and crafts of 400 years had been preserved.

The churches were mostly empty now, she had read. Even so, they dominated the city as we saw up close on our dizzying cab ride through the narrow cobblestone streets that rose and fell with my stomach.

We're not real adventurous, especially Dad, so when it came to hotels, we stayed with one of the big American chains. At the front desk, they spoke perfect English. Of course, the food was best when it looked and sounded like something we had eaten before. Pizza and steak were safe. No translation needed. Coke was universal, too.

It rained Saturday and Sunday—that time of year, they said—so we all stayed indoors. We girls went shopping. We stayed in the upper town using the church towers to navigate. The boys watched college football in the room.

We got back late Sunday night, but because Dad forgot the passkey, we had to wait past midnight for the security guard to let us in the gate.

Finally home, my brother luggered his stuff into his room and slammed the door underscoring the “KEEP OUT” warning on his door.

I rolled my suitcase into my room, locked the door—CARBON LIFE EXPERIMENT to the outside world—and pulled out my i-Phone. That's when I stopped taking notes.

“So, Ellen, what did you say was the name of the city? Maybe others would like to visit.”

“Uh, it's not really real. I sort of made it up.”

“Ellen, you know you were supposed to speak, not read, about a REAL vacation in a REAL place. I'll excuse it this once, because I did say this is not a graded assignment. Class, did you notice how Ellen's story personalized the ‘walled city’

theme? That was clever, Ellen, and I'm sure you came up with it on your own. Who's next? Kevin, I think you are."

*First published in Apocrypha and Abstractions, Issue 14,
June 7, 2012.*

The House Two Doors Down

... misappropriated sympathy [ed.]

Herman's house was being taken down. The giant orange crab claw rhythmically dug into the shrinking house and pulled out the twisted, broken, and pulverized remains and dumped them into large steel bins. From my front window, I couldn't see anyone operating the destructive machine. Several thickset men, with only their white faces unprotected from the cold, stood off at a distance, talking more with their hands than their voices.

Two doors down, right where two streets came together in a T, I had a good view. The sound effects were pretty good, too, especially when the jerking hydraulic claw dropped its heavy bucket load of debris. The sound reverberated through the naked trees, occasionally rattling the windows. With just a little imagination, the machine looked like a sea monster from the early days of Japanese horror movies. This one's name was Hitachi. I don't recall the name of the one Godzilla fought in the 1960s, but Godzilla would have been no match for what I was watching from my window. This thing was enormous. Its powerful orange arm, even flexed, was taller than the two-storey houses on either side, and fully extended it could probably top the blue spruce next to what had been the garage.

The machine monster was relentless in its demolition but remarkably under control. If it were to go berserk, the houses on three sides would have been summarily gutted just like Herman's. The round white-faced men propped up against their F-150s seemed to have trained this beast well. Every once in a while, one them would point or wave his arms or yell a single syllable command, and the beast would pause and then take a

new course of action. I wondered if these things ever disobeyed or misbehaved—in real life, I mean, not in fictional horror stories and movies.

Just after five, when the last bin was driven off, and the machine monster had been loaded and chained in place on the heavy equipment hauler, the first real snow of the season started falling. It was sticking and probably covering the scarred land where Herman's house had been. If this kept up, I'd still be able to see out my window all night long, though now there'd just be a hole between two houses.

It's not as if I liked or disliked Herman. I don't even know if Herman was his name. We never spoke or waved or anything. He kept to himself, too. Years ago when I used to get out, I'd walk my dog past his house a couple of times a day, and he was always there at the window. That was it. Two doors down and that's the extent of our lives crossing. Nevertheless, I felt kinda sorry to see his house get ripped apart like that and treated like garbage. Maybe it's because I can see someone looking out their window one day and watching mine get demolished. I know it WILL happen. Watching Herman's house come down, I FELT it.

First published in Larks Fiction Magazine, Issue 9, Volume 3, February 26, 2012.

The Queue

... beware of line-ups where you can't see the door [ed.]

I had to stop looking at my watch. Time had never gone by so fast just standing in line. I had my whole lunch hour, but it looked like it was going to be a lot longer.

Although I couldn't see the beginning or end of the line, I figured I must be somewhere in the middle. It had taken me 45 minutes to get this far, so it shouldn't be much more than another 45 minutes before I'd be back in the office, well before my two o'clock meeting.

The room was overheated and I'd been carrying my overcoat since I arrived. Most everyone else had done the same. The air circulation was poor, and a couple of times somebody fouled the air. Could have been the old guy behind me or the baby in the stroller in front of me. Whoever it was and whatever it was, it stayed for a good long while. A handkerchief helped, but my eyes still watered heavily.

The walls of this very large waiting room were beige and empty, and the ceilings were uncomfortably low. There were no reference points—no pictures, no furniture, no square floor tiles. I marked progress by counting my steps. There was little else to do. The conversations around me might have been interesting, but they were whispered and concealed. I'm sure I would have relaxed my rule against eavesdropping if it hadn't been so much work. I'd forgotten my iPhone—big mistake.

The smell from the last one hadn't dissipated and in fact moved with us. I had counted 25 steps, which I thought was

good until I checked my watch—30 minutes gone. I still couldn't see past the line of people ahead of me. It wasn't a proper heel-toe, heel-toe queue. Groups of people up and down the line clustered together like the knots on a climbing rope.

All of sudden we moved ... another 7 steps—must have been a large party—and then suddenly, from somewhere ahead and off to the right, a thin young man in a saffron-coloured shirt, striped trousers, and thick sandals, came running at us chased by two blue-uniformed guards. I couldn't tell where exactly they'd come from. I didn't see any doors in that direction, but there had to be doors. All those people who had been served went somewhere, and it wasn't through the doors behind us. We'd have seen them.

The young man was tackled about 15 feet in front me, so I got an unpleasant close-up as the guards smashed his face into the floor, jerked him up, and hustled him away. Well, that sent all the youngsters around into a sympathetic crying panic. For once I didn't object to the sound. It seemed appropriate.

There were a few shouts of outrage, but they were put down quickly when the guards were seen putting their free hands on their holstered weapons. Obviously, these were not ordinary guards. After the young man was dragged out of view, the waiting room became quieter—young and old alike seemed to be seized by a collective fear.

I checked my watch. That had only taken 5 minutes. Incredible.

But what was really incredible was that something like this could happen here and in a line-up for ... what was it? What in the hell was this?

I turned to the old man behind me, not thinking that he might not understand me. "Why are you here?", I asked.

"Same as you," he said.

"I'm not sure anymore why I'm here," I said.

He just shrugged his shoulders and freshened the air again. So, it was the old man, after all.

"I have to leave," I said.

"You can't. Doors only open from outside," he answered.

"How ... how do you know?", I asked.

"That skinny fellow. See what they did to him," he answered.

I turned around and sought protection inside my handkerchief.

Up ahead an extended family—maybe 20 to 25 people—got out of line and started walking to the doors behind us. I tried to warn them, but they didn't understand. Others tried. Out of nowhere a dozen helmeted guards, batons raised high, surrounded the entourage, and escorted the bewildered family away.

We moved 27 steps on that one, but I was growing very concerned about what I'd find at the front of the line. This couldn't be a line for voting or driver's licenses or concert tickets or the flu shot or some other normal business. I asked the old man behind me if he wanted to change places, to move up a little, and he looked at me like I was a fool.

When I turned back around, the young mother in front of me asked me the same question. "He's just a baby—not even one year old yet," she added. I didn't know what to say so I said "Yes." God knows why. This happened several more times, most often with gestures not words, and each time I was too cowardly to say "No."

It was 3:40, and by then I didn't care anymore. I decided to end the suspense, so I negotiated my way to the front of the line. It was amazing how easy it was. Within 15 minutes, I moved more than 100 steps.

At the front there were no service reps, no agents. There was no counter. There was just a kiosk with a thumbprint sign-on screen and behind it a portal. I'd seen its doors glide open and shut soundlessly as people walked through. Once when several people entered together, I glimpsed the words "Keep to the BLUE line" on an electronic billboard.

My first two attempts to sign on failed, and everybody knew it. The warning buzzer let everyone know—both times. It couldn't be that complicated. Must have been nerves. I couldn't keep my hand from shaking. Fear of the blue guards made me try again, the third time I carefully placed my thumb in the outline on the screen and held my hand steady with the other hand. This time it worked, and the computer instructed me to

“Keep to the BLUE line.” Relieved, I walked over towards the portal, pressed my thumb on the sensor, and entered.

I don’t have any memory of what happened beyond that. I don’t even recall why I was in the line in the first place. All I know is what I’ve already said. I feel fine now—perfectly normal, better than normal, really, though I do have a strong aversion to queues and crowds and lining up.

But here in my new room, I don’t have to worry about that anymore. Everything I need comes to me—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—and everything around me is within easy reach. This was worth waiting for. If I could say one thing to you out there, it would be, “Relax. Don’t resist. Things aren’t always what they seem. You’ll be more content than you ever imagined.”

First published in Danse Macabre du Jour March 22, 2013.

The Bus Station

...the streets of San Francisco [ed.]

Andy would wish he had never seen the young teenage boy walking towards the men's room.

It was well past midnight in the bus station. One of the officers had said "Don't go into the restrooms alone," and his partner added "and whatever you do, don't fall asleep."

That unsettled Andy. His bus to Salt Lake City was another 6 hours away, and he was tired and had drunk a lot of water walking up and down the hills, killing time. He'd missed the famous cable cars; they wouldn't be back until the following year, he heard.

He'd already seen more than he wanted to see in the Mission District and that was in daylight. In the dark, the city had an altogether different atmosphere—foreign and threatening. It was better in the bus station as long as other passengers were around. But at this time of night, there were only two—Andy and a young black soldier—Army, it seemed.

The mood inside changed for the worse when an old white-haired giant wearing a baggy and soiled mustard-coloured suit lumbered in shouting loudly at an invisible companion. The old guy circled and studied the young soldier, who sat quietly staring unblinkingly at his Reader's Digest. On his second pass, the old guy stopped, wobbled a bit, and screamed in the soldier's face. The soldier must have been fresh in the service because his whole body screamed back in silent fear. The old guy kept screaming and then stopped as suddenly as a summer downpour and walked away.

Andy was angered but mostly stunned. What kind of person— What kind of place was this where a person could be assaulted for no reason whatsoever? And where were the cops—security, anybody?

An hour or so later, a pleasant, round little man, deeply-tanned from his bald pate to his sandaled feet and sporting a brilliant pink polo shirt, walked in, passed the soldier, and approached Andy. He engaged Andy in friendly conversation about the weather, the city, and finally religion. After judging that the man wasn't recruiting for a cult, Andy put his religious upbringing to good use. After 45 minutes of theological discussion, the pleasant, round little man politely excused himself and said he had to go make some money.

Over the next two hours, more came in from the streets—some almost normal. One of the “normals,” in a business suit but without the tie, was looking for someone in particular, but it seemed odd that he didn't stop to ask the soldier or Andy for help. A second went straight to the lockers and took out something, which he tucked away inside his 49ers windbreaker. A scary-looking couple, maybe a man and a woman, went into the men's room. Meanwhile, an ancient woman, her back crooked so badly the floor was just two feet from her face, settled into an out-of-the-way corner for herself, her cat, and her overfull grocery cart.

Just after 4:30, Andy saw the freckle-faced teen walking in the direction of the restrooms. Andy couldn't recall seeing him in the bus station earlier, but he wasn't sure. The teenager was carrying a suitcase. His short-sleeve plaid shirt was buttoned to the top, and his blue jeans didn't quite reach the top of his white crew socks.

The cops hadn't returned and probably wouldn't. Andy looked across at the soldier. His eyes were glazed over—the magazine lay limp in his lap.

Andy couldn't help himself. He had to warn the boy. It was the right thing to do. That's how he'd been raised.

But what if it was the kid that was the dangerous one. Maybe he had been an innocent, a runaway but had become an itinerant serial killer. Suppose he were to warn the kid, and the kid were to turn and give him that look—the look of a cold-blooded killer? And what if the kid had a serrated stainless steel hunting knife in that suitcase?

Out of the corner of his eye Andy glimpsed a head peeping out of the men's room, and quickly got up and walked over to take a seat next to the soldier.

First published in Larks Fiction Magazine, Issue 5, Volume 4, July 16, 2012.

... a reaction to the life in the post-20th century era [ed.]

On a clear day I can see the old man across the way. He stands there on his balcony, like a captain on the bowsprit of an old sailing ship, scanning the surface of the massive housing tower in front of him—mine.

Usually, the air is thickly gray up here on the 97th floor, and I'm sure he can't see my hive any more than I can see his. That and the boredom probably explain why, when I do see him, his examination is so thorough. But, no doubt, I'm projecting.

Anyway, it was one of those rare days that we met. We waved, nodded our heads once or twice, and even tried to speak though our voices didn't carry on account of the overhead traffic noise. It's worst—the noise, that is—from 5:00 to 10:00 in the morning and 4:00 to 9:00 in the evening, but it's growing more constant even in the wee hours of the morning, especially due to increasing commercial traffic.

Sundays, on one of the two state holidays left, offer one of the best chances for a clear day, and today's one. I haven't opened my blinds yet, nor have I peeked to see if he has. First, I'll order up a coffee and a bagel with cream cheese, read the paper, and watch an episode or two of *I Love Lucy* on the digital screen in the kitchen.

By 10:03 a.m., the blinds have already opened, programmed to exterior light levels and my late sleeping schedule. The curse of old age—one of many, actually—is that as life gets shorter, the sleepless nights get unbearably long. His are now open as well.

I pick up my cigarette case and head for the balcony. Ordinarily, I smoke the smokeless cigarettes, because they're the only ones that are legal, but today, I thought I'd have a real cigarette. The tobacco in these is as black as the market they came from.

In the background, I can hear Rickie chiding Lucy. As I open the door to the balcony, the warm air that rushes in nearly suffocates me with its heavy stickiness. Through the glass, it looked like a beautiful day. I always forget that the smell and the feel of the air never clear up when the gray lifts.

Immediately upon turning around after closing the balcony door, I see the old man, and we exchange waves and nods. We light up at the same time and start our ritual survey of the other's hive.

Something seems different about the old man. He's unsteady on his feet and he's grabbing the balcony rail hard. The cigarette drops from his lips, and he releases his hold on the rail to scratch his arms and neck feverishly, losing his balance and free falling 97 stories down to the pavement below.

Stunned, I stare at his empty balcony and can't believe it! All this time, I'd thought the old man was just a reflection in the window across the way.

First published in Liquid Imagination Issue 14 August 2012.

An Invitation to a Beheading by Adam Mac

... the logical conclusion of reality TV? [ed.]

In the late 21st century, beheading is an extreme hazing ritual of interstellar business. Earth has been transformed into a production facility for an enormous commercial enterprise in a distant galaxy. On Earth, there is no unemployment. Everyone has work, but all Earth jobs are mean, mundane, or miserable.

The ritual has been popularized and exported widely as entertainment. Once a month, in an intergalactic-televised event, a competition is staged to promote one of Earth's more promising epsilons. The winner is appointed to the Earth Council, headquartered on a cloaked space station in high orbit.

The event takes place on the Earth's moon in a virtual room created for the series. There are three contestants. This week, they are: epsilon zeta (EZ), an IT consultant; epsilon delta (ED), an accountant; and epsilon tau (ET), a marine sergeant.

EZ, ED, and ET face one another in an empty room with a chair, a blindfold, and a poleaxe. Each gets one of the three articles.

The instructions are simple. The successful contestant must behead the other two. But the poleaxe can only be used by someone who is wearing the blindfold while standing on the chair. No communication is allowed. Beheading is the only acceptable means of killing. Violation of the rules is severely punished.

As soon as we're back from commercials, ET hoists the poleaxe, EZ stands behind the back of the chair, and ED

thoughtlessly attaches the blindfold straightaway. The division of articles is now prearranged. One of the early episodes ended prematurely when all three contestants went for the poleaxe and ended up in a bloody pileup.

At the start signal, ET kicks the chair in ED's direction then hooks ED's blindfold with the poleaxe. Jumping on the chair, ET hauls ED in stumbling, head down, and arms waving uselessly by his side. EZ runs off into the farthest corner of the room. ET raises the poleaxe high overhead to bring down on ED's bare neck, but before he can deliver the blow, an intense electric charge surges through his body sending him into a collapsed heap.

EZ seizes the opportunity and rushes over to remove ED's blindfold and stun him by punching him in the face. With ED and ET on the floor, EZ picks up the poleaxe, steps onto the chair, puts on the blindfold, and then swings the poleaxe in the direction of ET's neck. He connects but not with ET's neck. ET has moved just in time to avoid the fatal blow, but he does get it in the leg, which starts bleeding heavily. EZ, realizing he only has one more swing, pulls the blade out and swings it in a roundhouse, this time catching ED, who has just regained his feet, in the chest with the point of the blade. ED tries to remove the blade but slices both hands in the process and only manages to create a larger wound. ED falls face down in the pool of his own rapidly discharging blood.

Meanwhile, ET crawls over to where EZ is still standing on the chair with his blindfold on, tugging at the poleaxe to free it from under ED's inert body. ET grabs both of EZ's legs and pulls them out from under him. EZ comes down hard, hitting his head on the edge of the chair. Seeing that the fallen EZ still has

a pulse, ET rips off the blindfold with his left hand and opens it to conceal the quick strangling motion of his right hand. But camera 14 catches this and immediately a second and much stronger current rocks ET and instantly vaporizes all nerve activity from his brain to his fingers and toes.

All three epsilons lay still on the floor as the cameras pan across room. The cutaway to commercial is slow—deliberately slow. Back from commercials, the room is clean and empty. Next month's feature is announced—a building contractor, a Cardinal, and an English teacher—and a musical tribute to the Earth Council follows.

The end.

#

So, Mr. epsilon beta, you say this is a recurring dream you have?

Yeah, doc. What do you think?

These dreams you're having—they sound remarkably like—

Invitation to a Beheading, the TV show. Yeah, I know.

Well, in my opinion—remember, in our first session, I advised that if you really must read Stephen King you shouldn't skip your meds? Well, it's the same kind of thing here, I think. You should avoid this TV program. It's poisoning your dreams. You're still taking your medication regularly, aren't you, Mr. epsilon beta?

Yeah, I am. But I can't help it. I'm drawn to this show. It's like I can see my fate, and I have to watch.

And these dreams have been going on how long did you say?

About four months. It started not long after I last saw you. Around the same time, I got a registered letter from the show's producers congratulating me on having been 'selected' for next season's contestant lottery.

First published in Weirdyear, August 24, 2012.

Killer Voice Mail

... what's in a voice mail message? [ed.]

Hey baby, I'm still at work but I'm taking the day off tomorrow. I bought some things today I think you might like to see me in—or not in. Be over five thirtyish. I'll shower at your place, then we can go out. Bye baby.

Beep

Hi Mr. Nichols, this is Marcy and I'm calling from AAA Doors, Windows, Kitchens, and Bathrooms. We specialize while others diversify. We're currently working in your neighbourhood. Today and tomorrow, we have a team of friendly, professional project managers in your building complex providing free estimates to 25 lucky condo owners. We want to save you the hassle of making an appointment, so we'll come to you. Someone will be by later today. Be assured that our project managers are not salesmen. They oversee all our projects, so you know they will give you reliable, expert advice. Again, my name is Nancy, and, if you prefer not to be contacted, please call and we'll take you off the list. That number is (555) ***-****. I'll repeat—

Beep

Mikhail, my man, 'sup? Listen man, gotta score, like right now. You owe me bro'. Got this real hot chick, dig? Visiting a cousin or somethin. From Brazil, man. Yeah! Speaks no English, but no problemo. By in a few. I'll let myself in. Ciao!

Beep

Mr., um, Quondam, the book you special ordered has arrived. It was quite difficult to locate a copy, because only 10 copies were published. It's a real limited edition, and if I may say, that's a blessing, because it's truly revolting—probably even illegal. Since you already paid and I don't want anything more to do with it, I'll hand deliver the book myself. I've got your address. And, please, Mr. Quondam, let this be your last order with us.

Beep

Michael, Mr. Jones here. Something's come up, Michael. Mr. Smith says the, er, drawings for the Mayfair campaign aren't yours. Says they're Mr. White's. That's not good, Michael. I'm very disappointed in you, Michael. You shoulda been straight with me. Mr. Smith's on his way over to give you a lift. Good-bye Michael.

Beep

Mickey, this is your sister, Annie, if you're there, please pick up. It's Dad. He's had a heart attack. They rushed him to emergency, and I need you here to help with Mom. She's losing it. I persuaded Father Donovan to stop by and give you a ride since your license is still suspended. Mom said you called Dad earlier today. What did you say to him?

Beep

Hello, Mike? I'm so sorry to bother you. Sorry, it's Sofia, from the apartment below. I don't know if you remember— We met in the lobby a few weeks ago when I was moving in. we exchanged phone numbers, um, so that's how I got your num-

ber. Is everything OK up there? It sounded like you fell – maybe from a ladder. I'm a little worried, because it got real quiet. I'm gonna call the super in case you're hurt and can't come to the door, alright?

Beep

First published in The Rusty Nail, January 2013.

A Fantastic Commute

... the blur between the real and the unreal in our routines [ed.]

Lately, he hadn't been feeling himself. Overworked, burnt out. Covering for this person then that one. Pulled in all directions. Spread thin and stretched beyond his limits.

It was standing room only on the morning express train, and he stood wearing a freshly-altered suit with the back of his head mashed up against the roof of the car. In twenty years riding the train, he'd never been so cramped. From his vantage point, he could see the little heads, tucked behind newspapers, chattering away on the phone, or retreating behind shuttered eyelids and pulsing earbuds.

At Union he realized he was stuck and couldn't easily dislodge himself. Twisting his broad hips and long legs to the edge of the aisle, he watched upside down as the passengers shoved under and past, paying him no more mind than they would a column in the station concourse.

Once the car was empty, he was able to kneel and bend until he came loose, and in a semi-squatting stance, still stiff, he waddled out the door. After unfolding to his full height, he looked up and down the tracks for the nearest exit. It was on the other side of the tracks. Seeing that no one was looking, he grabbed the CCTV camera and pointed it away, and in one great stride crossed from platform 5B to 5A. Squeezing through the narrow double exit doors, catapulting down the station steps, and finally swimming above a swirling stream of tiny heads on short, bifurcated pedestals, he made his way to street level.

It was too early for the sun. The city lights cast faint shadows in the dawn. Cabbies honked and there was a multilingual cacophony of loud and excited voices in the cab rank.

Pedestrians and drivers dared and double dared over the last bit of amber in the traffic light. A homeless person, unable to get his attention, spat at him as he walked by holding a handkerchief to his face. A gaggle of teenage girls crashed into him and, on turning their heads, screamed and ran.

He hurried away himself. In two effortless steps he reached the opposite curb where he knocked over the pompous doorman of the Royal who was signalling a limousine to pull up. Getting to his feet, the servant, red-faced and ripe, with a tone that comes from years of service, launched into a fusillade of spiteful and contemptuous remarks. Mid-sentence, the lumbering colossus, provoked, gazed down on the round, red, balding head and squished it between thumb and forefinger.

He waited in a makeshift jail in the port lands, while the authorities debated their extrajudicial options, namely whether to ship him to the zoo or the museum. It was the museum. There, a new tailor—this one a PhD in anthropology—outfitted him with clothing suitable for a wide range of exhibits BCE.

First published in Linguistic Erosion, August 19, 2012.

Hindsight

...on seeing the past in the present [ed.]

Street level in the financial district it was dark and the streetlights were still on. Overhead the sky was blue and sunlight glinted off the windows of the upper floors.

Seven o'clock in the morning used to mean a seat on the train all the way in. Now it's standing room only ... if you're lucky. And in the train station, the concourse is packed from six on. By seven thirty the one-block walk to the subway is an achingly slow shuffle. One step, two steps, stop. Step back to let people into the food court. Step forward, reach for a door, push into the surge of bodies. Pass through the smokers' gauntlet. Walk through the next set of doors, down the cracked tile steps, carefully through the spinning turnstile and then off to the shortest escalator line-up.

At the office by eight, he rarely had time to himself anymore, because the rest of the management team was also coming in early, and like him they weren't going home any earlier. By eight he was fully engaged and he didn't stop until after one, when he and a few of the other managers went to a bar for lunch.

Meetings were booked solid through the day and micro-managed down to the scripts. He lectured and commanded his people. Among his peers in meetings, he was a team player. When summoned by the executive, he nodded on cue.

Sometimes by seven, like tonight, but usually before eight, unless it was end of quarter, meetings were wrapping up and cell phones were coming out to make or change appointments.

Ritually, allowances were made for a round or two of decompression drinking at a bar on the way to the station.

But not tonight. He had an engagement with his wife. Thanks to her family's endowments over the years, they were members of the exclusive museum society and had been invited to a special preview. Though not the enthusiast his wife was, he was amenable as long as there were no crowds, pushing and shoving, no offensive odours, and absolutely no children.

The preview didn't start until 8:30, so when he phoned her he suggested they meet at the little Hungarian place around the corner behind the museum. The service there was polite and friendly—quaint—and the schnitzel and beer were good stout fare for a long evening.

Back at the museum in plenty of time, they were greeted by the director and the curator and then mingled with the other guests before proceeding to the exhibit.

The main hall, its ceiling also the roof of the four-story museum, swallowed the elite gathering. In the centre was what the curator described as a reconstruction of a royal burial structure, made entirely of stone in the shape of a pyramid with a flat top. Its back half was cross-sectioned to reveal a three-dimensional labyrinth and to reduce its base in proportion to its forty-foot height.

According to the curator, a self-described aficionado and autodidact of the architecture, a pyramid structure of this modest scale would have required a few thousand men working between five and ten years to construct, using the primitive tools of the period. A 14-hour day in temperatures above 40°C

with limited fresh water and no shade was typical and that was on top of the daily two-hour ritual trek to the site and back.

The rest of the curator's remarks were directed to the phenomenal human engineering predating the Mesoamerican pyramids, the extraordinary precision of the construction, the intricate underground network connecting the pyramidal structures on barren plains, and the deceptively simple form that disguised an infinitely complex and elaborate interior. The tour was an hour and a half, and at the conclusion, the consensus was that the exhibition would indeed vindicate the museum's decision to host this large and costly exhibition.

Afterward, he and his wife joined another couple for drinks and chatted about kids, college, vacation plans, retirement, and markets. The exhibit didn't come up. He and his wife shared a cab to the train station. He caught the train home and slept through his stop. She took the cab on to the airport for her flight to Beijing.

First published in Vending Machine Press, December 1, 2013.

... too much, too visceral [ed.]

The boys had swimming practice last night and I waited for them in the library next door. There's only so much you can do. A swim meet's one thing, but practice? Lap after lap after lap. Besides, the boys get embarrassed when their buddies see me.

I found a book of collected short stories by Shirley Jackson, a name I remembered from high school along with Flannery O'Connor and Truman something or other. These, for me, were the strange and provocative ones—the ones that stood out. Not Hemingway or Faulkner or Steinbeck.

Of course I had to re-read “The Lottery.” It had been so many years. As I read it, it seemed that the story fell into place, like I knew it. Nevertheless, it was disturbing just as it had been in 11th grade. But I was drawn in. I didn’t recognize any of the other titles, so I skimmed through the introduction to see what else might be worth reading, and I chose “The Renegade.”

It was even more disturbing, because I experienced it on a raw emotional level unlike “The Lottery,” which had been a text, a specimen we dissected and analyzed. This time I felt real empathy for the protagonist who was abandoned and overwhelmed by the chorus of voices who wanted her dog dead. The dog had killed a neighbour’s chickens and had to die. There was no other way. Everyone saw that. Everyone but her. Her children had heard the talk in school, and while they were having lunch at the kitchen table, they lustily described in graphic detail how the dog, the family pet, should be killed. The mother, shocked and horrified by their calculated bloodthirstiness, felt ripped out of her world, as if it was her that was

wearing the loose nail-studded collar on a long rope, racing full speed towards a yard full of chickens.

That was too much. Too visceral. I put the book down and went over to the computers to check my email and the first story I saw was about this dog that had been shot 100 times with a pellet gun and survived. This couldn't be true, I thought. A hundred times? Would that be just one really and truly mean, twisted person or could this have been another chicken-killing dog? And what are the chances of seeing this news article after just reading the story, I wondered. My curiosity was piqued, so I scrolled down beyond the end of the story to see some of the comments, and I was stunned.

Everyone, to a person, wanted the culprit(s) who had shot the dog to be caught but not just arrested. There were energetic calls for extreme and even wickedly creative violence against the perpetrator(s). The chorus cheered. There was no dissent. I, too, found it very, very difficult to disagree.

Thank goodness my sons interrupted before I had a chance to type my response, because I'm sure, being a Libra, I would have regretted acting so precipitously.

The younger one yelled over my shoulder, "Did you see that? Billy sent me the link. Man, when they catch that guy they oughta—"

"Put him in a pen with a starving pit bull," interrupted the older one. "Joey downloaded a video of a dog fight. It was so gross, and it went on and on. That guy wouldn't have anything left but—"

“Boys,” I said, “let’s just go home, I’m feeling a little dizzy. We’ll get a cab. Your father can pick up the car tomorrow.”

First published in Fiction365 November 13, 2012.

The Loose Screw

... OCD at 30,000 feet [ed.]

Andrew hated flying. He hadn't flown in years. He had good reasons. Eight years earlier, his plane had crash-landed in the Arizona desert. A year later, en route to Chicago, his plane got caught in a downdraft and, for a moment, appeared headed right into the sea of green corn below.

Even before these close calls, he'd never cared much for airplane disaster movies, but afterwards he wouldn't finish a movie if there was a scene about an airplane in distress. He walked out of several. Nevertheless, images lingered. For this flight, a transcontinental flight to attend his father's funeral, he had bought a first class ticket because he wanted to get as far away from the wings as he could. If there was something on or wrong with the wing, he didn't want to know about it. If it's going to be bad, he thought, at least let it be quick and painless.

Finally, in the air and out over the water, Andrew leaned over and asked his neighbour, a middle-aged man wearing a blue Hawaiian shirt, to close the window blind. The flight attendant had insisted the window blind be kept open for takeoff. Regulations, she said. At the same time, she asked the man in the billowy blue flowered shirt to stow his bag in the overhead compartment. Instead, he offered to make it more compact so it would fit under the seat. He jostled things around and finally shoved the bag under his seat.

The beverage service was dispatched quickly and efficiently. No one got a lapful of hot coffee. For most, it was too early for alcohol, but not for his neighbour who got a double bourbon on the rocks and then another five minutes later. Eve-

rything seemed normal. Quiet in first class. The *Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* opened wide in front of every other person. From economy, the excited conversations of families or groups travelling together, and the hyperactive screams of young children were benevolently muted by distance. Classical guitar flowed through his earphones. Outside the window on the other side of the aisle, the plush white cottony clouds hid the ocean, and that was good.

Lunch service seemed to follow closely on the beverage service. When it arrived, he picked through the meal package methodically as if he was taking inventory. Nothing unusual, at least until he had finished eating. That's when he saw a short, fat, silver screw with a head like a mushroom. Just lying there on the floor. It was a machine screw, the kind used for metal on metal.

Where could it have come from? He didn't expect to find another screw, but he double-checked all the packaging that came with lunch. He checked the tray table—the top, the bottom, and the sides. Nothing was missing. Overhead, he didn't see any exposed metal. He felt his seat and the one in front. He looked up and down the aisle. He got up and investigated the overhead bin. Frustrated, he sat down, fastened his seat belt, and glanced over at the man in the blue Hawaiian shirt who had gone to sleep. He glanced at his neighbour's lunch, which hadn't been touched, then leaned back and closed his eyes.

He wondered what he should do. He thought about calling the young flight steward and showing him the screw, but he imagined the steward would shrug it off and say it was probably a loose screw from a food trolley or something. Nothing more. Certainly no reason to worry, he would say, then he would walk away tossing the screw in the air like a kid playing jacks.

Andrew hadn't thought about that. A screw missing from a food trolley. They probably do get handled pretty roughly and you wouldn't expect food trolleys to be maintained by the same people responsible for airplane maintenance. And, with that, Andrew settled back and turned up the music.

He suddenly jerked forward upon hearing the grating sound of metal rubbing on metal. Of course, he wouldn't be able to see the metal of the airplane because it was covered by the plastic facade of the cabin interior. So, with his music off, he listened to locate the noise, but the metallic scraping sound had disappeared.

He tried to relax again, but he began to imagine where that screw might have come from. Maybe it wasn't from a food trolley. That's just what they say to get passengers to relax and leave them alone. What if it was a screw holding together two pieces of the curved fuselage's metal skin? And what if the wind, at 600 miles per hour, was forcing those two sheets of metal apart, so that the rivets and screws were popping out all along the spine of the aircraft? How long would it be before the plane was ripped apart at the seams?

His eyelids popped open. The flight crew had to be warned. This time he wouldn't be put off like he had been by the steward. Someone who understood had to see. But the screw? Maybe there was another one. Maybe a lot. His neighbour was still sound asleep, so he removed the food tray, lifted the lid, and checked the grilled chicken, the green beans, the pasta, the cookie, and cellophane packaging for the plastic cutlery, but no screw.

Clearing away all the food, he buzzed for service. The steward came, collected the garbage, and asked if there was anything else. Andrew started to shake his head, then decided

he had to ask for the screw. So, he did. The steward said he didn't know what Andrew was talking about. Andrew raised his voice, and several heads popped up. He lowered his voice again and reminded the steward of their conversation, the screw, the food trolley. But the steward earnestly restated that he'd never seen the screw, much less taken it. Andrew backed off, confused by the man's evident honesty and his own clear recollection.

He apologized, said that he must be overwrought—his father's passing on top of his real fear of flying—and asked if he could have a drink. Something stronger than the ginger ale. How about what his neighbour had ordered before he passed out, er, went to sleep? Double bourbon, yes, that's it, but no ice. The steward returned with the drink and a pillow. Andrew thanked him and started to apologize, but the steward waved it away as unnecessary.

Andrew swallowed the last of his drink and, within minutes, he had fallen asleep, seat reclined, his head back against the headrest, mouth partially open. He must have slept quite a while, because he was woken up by the steward who asked him to move his seat forward to prepare for landing.

His neighbour was up and fiddling around with his carry-on bag under the seat again. He told Andrew that he had lost something or, rather, something had come loose. He had bought a toy for his nephew and it was very elaborately constructed, but the threads at one of the joints must have been stripped, and now, he was missing a screw—a short, fat, silver screw with a mushroom-shaped head. Had Andrew seen it?

First published in Lowestoft Chronicle Issue 13, Spring 2013.

A Word in Edgewise

... amidst vultures, a man finds his voice [ed.]

The fluorescent lights must have grown dim to his unblinking eyes. His body hadn't been moved or turned in—well, these charts couldn't be trusted. Since the IV diet had been imposed, the custodial care seemed to have slackened off. It got easier to be forgotten. The machinery monitoring his body was his only company.

But one day it summoned the family. Everyone gathered around. Layered voices—loud, garrulous, cloying—came together in a twangy, raspy dissonance, punctuated by coughing spasms incited by rival perfumes. The shapes of family hovered over the bed, and the staff stood back, waiting.

"Daddy, I know you can hear me but is there anything you'd like to say. Just squeeze my hand, okay? That'll be good enough for me. Daddy, this is goodbye. Not just 'bye' but really and truly goodbye. It's very important to me, Daddy, that you know I've, uh, we've done everything that could be done. You know I'd never do anything but what was best for—"

"Terrell, you never was a big talker. Matter of fact, I don't recollect when I last heard you string two words together. But that ain't neither here nor there, cause I think you know what your little girl here is tryin to say. That she loves you, and for that matter, I think I speak for everybody here when I say we all do. I know, I know. Ya'll quit making faces. I'm talkin to Terrell. Anyhow, we didn't often see eye to eye, did we Terrell, but—and I ain't sure I ever said this to you—I did look up to you when we was growin up—"

"Lester, just keep quiet for once. This ain't neither the time nor the place for you to start eulogizing. Phony eulogizing at that, truth be told. Gotta be centre stage though, don't you? And always flappin that yap of yours. That's what Terrell would've told you to your face if he'd had any gumption. But I have enough for him and me, and now, time like this, I say we don't need your long-winded—"

"Just tryin to be nice, Sis."

"Oh, I wish we could just get this over with. I've gotta be downtown in half an hour and traffic's gonna be murder. So, what else do we have to do here? I mean we're not gonna make funeral arrangements yet, are we? And the will—well, that better not come up til after next week, because Giancarlo and I will be in Cancún—"

"I heard ole J.C. was with some new young thing. That you, darlin? You better work fast, kitten, 'cause he's not gonna get out from under this one, and there ain't gonna be much left for you. But why am I telling you? It ain't like you're one to be a day late and a dollar short, including today, ain't that right honey?"

"Shut up! Just SHUT UP, okay! You have no business speaking to me like that ... and on a day like today."

"And here you are—the both of you—just waitin for the old man to kick off. I'm sure he—well, maybe not him, but his dear departed wife, may she rest in peace—would've had a few choice words for you two right about—"

"Uncle Lester, despite your silly platitudes, you want the same thing I want ... the same thing we all want. Besides,

you're not one to act high and mighty, you old lecher. That's right! Uncle Lester, you're a lecherous old fool. There! If anybody didn't know it before, they do now. It was the summer I finished high school. In your backyard swimming pool. Aunt Edna was drunk like always. I still remember the look on your face when I kicked you in the crotch. That comes from my momma's side. Served you right, you creep. You oughta be locked up, you perv—"

"Lester! Is that true? A child! And your own kin! My niece, too, and her momma, a saint of a woman, except for that temper of hers. She'd have flayed you good fashion, like I've a mind to do right this minute. Good god, man! What were you—"

"Shhh. I think I heard him say something. Listen."

"Come on, he hasn't said anything in months, what's he gonna say?"

"Hush."

"I heard something, too. Sounded like 'Oh'"

"Pain, that's what it is. He still feels pain. Poor, poor Daddy!"

"Sooner we do this the—"

"No, not yet. I wanna hear. It's something else, not—"

"Yep, could be a word. Could be 'no' or 'know,' or 'Joe.' But that don't make no sense. Do we know a Joe? I know a lot of Johns. What about—"

"Go!"

"He's sayin 'go.' He's tellin us it's time for him to—"

"No. The old man's tryin to tell us to 'go.' Whaddya know about that! Ole Terrell. Finally—"

"Go!"

"Well, I never—"

"And that might just be why—"

"But Daddy—"

First published in Page & Spine, August 1, 2014.

... life's levelling effect [ed.]

They just discovered they'd taken the same class in college 15 years ago. Now Marv and Cami had adjacent cubicles in a call centre.

Last Friday night they and some of the other CSRs went out to a sports bar. The playoffs were underway, and everyone was a hockey fan this year—to varying degrees—since the home team had a chance to win the Cup.

They were 12 to start with, but two had to leave early because of a double shift the next day. Everyone was eating and drinking, talking and laughing and having a good all-around time. Marv and Cami happened to be seated next to one another.

On the huge TV screen, the announcer screamed “GOAL! Pedersen’s slap shot IN the back of the net!”

Cami, watching the replay, said “Actually, I prefer slapstick.”

“That would be highly illegal even in this game, Cami, but keep a good thought,” said Marv.

“Hmm, yeah. After today’s day, that’s not easy. What a pack of whiny, lying, rude bastards they are sometimes.”

“You gotta have a thick skin, not take it so personal. Course, it helps to drink—afterwards, I mean. Puts things in a different—perspective.”

“I do, but I didn’t even drink this much in college. We oughta get a, uh, a mood rehabilitation allowance or something. Don’t you think?”

“Drinking money. What a great idea Cami! How ‘bout you run that one by Percy?”

“Can’t blame a girl for dreaming. And if the gods are listening, mine’s pretty modest compared to some.”

“Hey, did you see that? Puck right in the kisser. God that had to hurt. There’s blood all over the ice.”

“Think we should cheer, too?”

“God no! That would be like— What’s that German word— means when you get off on somebody else’s pain?”

“*Schadenfreude.*”

“You came up with that pretty fast.”

“Yeah, well everybody’s using it these days—except maybe tweeters. Personally, I try to enjoy some everyday. Got it from *meine mutter*. She spoke German. She used it a lot when she talked about her *mutter*.”

“So, you speak German?”

“Just enough to insult you without your knowing it, but not enough to qualify as business bilingual, *Verdammit.*”

“Whoa! They’re taking the guy off in a stretcher. That’s gotta be more than a mouthful of broken teeth.”

“Guess that’s what it means to get royally fucked.”

“Wow, you’re vicious tonight. What gives?”

“Can we get some more drinks over here?” Cami said to the waitress.

“C’mon, did you think 15 years after college you’d be doing this shit?” asked Cami.

“Course not, but I’ve had worse jobs—mailroom, warehouse. The worst was selling annuities door-to-door.”

“My last year of college I had a great offer. Entry level, with a multinational and ‘lots of growth potential,’ they said.”

“What happened? You didn’t turn it down?”

“Don’t be stupid. They turned me down. Flunked the final in International Trade and then got turned in for cheating.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Did you cheat?”

“Hmph! There was a lot going on back then. Anyway, the bastard was on to me and he tricked me. He deliberately checked all the wrong answers and like a fool I copied them

exactly. Must've changed them back after I left. But he wasn't as clever as he thought. Instead of a zero, I got a 12, so I hope it f____ his GPA."

"I see. But why didn't you go to Professor Battaglia and explain you were sick or in the middle of a tragedy or something and ask for a retest?"

"Could have if someone hadn't tipped him off and told him I was cheating."

"Damn, Cami! I'm so sorry, I had no idea that—"

"It's not your fault. But, wait a minute how did you know my prof's name? I know you went to City College and all, but—"

"I was in third year—that was the year we made it to the NIT—and I was gonna graduate early. Battaglia's class was one of five Econ courses I was taking."

"Whew! I only had the one and that was one too many. Maybe you remember the guy. Had a freckled face sorta like yours and this great big fro. Looked like a botched home perm. Really smart guy though—had to have been an Economics major—but he wasn't at all obnoxious from what I could tell. Not that we ever spoke. We International Business students were cliquish—as bad as the Greeks."

"Don't think so. It's been a long time."

"Some days, it seems like just yesterday. By the way, how'd you do?"

“Um, passed but might as well have failed. I needed an A to get a grad school scholarship, but I choked. Just stupid, careless mistakes.”

In the background, the announcer yelled “SCORE! Gagner’s shot OFF the skate of Taranov—” and the bar erupted in raucous jubilation as the home team had forced an overtime.

First published in Down in the Dirt, March/April 2014, vol. 122.

Improvisation by Adam Mac

... one of McMillan's ESL students? [ed.]

Nguyen, known as Win, had lived in a small town on the outskirts of Halifax for nearly two years. He had work in the city, friends, and life was pretty good. His English, however, was still poor, he felt—native fluency being his standard. So, he took advantage of every opportunity to improve his English, and being a gregarious person, there were lots.

Early on, some of the locals sniggered. Win wasn't stupid, and he knew he was the butt of many silly jokes, but he didn't care. Over time, his persistence won over even the surliest, old postmaster Ferguson, and the burliest, Chief Taggart. A quick study, Win got to where he could verbally diagram sentences during conversations, and this impressed a few, then intimidated some more, and ultimately annoyed everyone. He kept on doing it but only in his head.

At the office, one of the favourite topics to bitch about was telemarketers. Hang-ups and call screening were the common solutions. Win used to be polite, but now he hung up, too. Tony had tried bullying, but it took a lot more effort than he'd imagined, so he gave up. Ian had just set up a business line with a pay-per-call service and was collecting 10 cents a minute for telemarketing calls. Shelagh, the English expert with a Master's from Dalhousie, exasperated at playing thesaurus, got the messianic idea that Win should practice on telemarketers.

It was genius! In the evening, Win set up a dummy online account with a luring marketing profile—a St. Mary's undergrad working two jobs—and waited ... but not long.

"Good evening, is Mr. N-GOO-YEN there?"

"Call me Win."

"Thank you, Mr. Win. We understand you have an excellent credit rating, and you're just the type of individual that qualifies for our new platinum double plus card."

"You mean 'who?'"

"Who?' I'm sorry sir, I don't follow."

"You said 'the type of individual that.' Shouldn't it be 'the type of individual who?'"

"Sure. If you like. But you do know what I meant, right?"

"With that—uh, what's the word—oh yeah, clarification. With that clarification, I get it. Can I phrase it that way?"

"Yes, you may Mr. Win, but—"

"Wouldn't 'subject to that clarification' sound better?"

"Absolutely sir, but I'd like to get back to the—"

"Excuse me, please. I have one more question. What does this 'double plus' mean?"

"It means the highest level."

"Excuse me. Just one more question, please. Wouldn't it be clearer—or is it 'more clear'—"

"Either way, sir."

"—to say 'peak platinum' or 'pinnacle platinum' instead of 'platinum double plus'?"

"It's just a name, eh?"

"Ah, okay. So, is this card better than a Visa gold card? Or, an MNBA or MNFL card? And platinum, is that really the best card, because platinum isn't the most expensive—"

"Sir, I really don't know. But sir—uh, Mr. Win—I'm running out of time for this call, so if you don't mind I'd really like to get back to the reason I called."

"Yes. Yes. But could, uh, would you first give me some feedback? You see I'm practicing my English— my conversational English—and I'd appreciate— Hello?"

First published in Linguistic Erosion, November 10, 2013.

The Recruit by Adam Mac

... just another reason for kids to be wary of strangers [ed.]

Wanna see a modern-day miracle, kid?

Whatever.

Well, just sit tight.

Sure. It's not like I'm going anywhere.

Here, take the binoculars. See that old guy on the bridge? Orange raincoat, red baseball cap, using a cane? Over there, to the left of the first tower. Can't miss him.

Yeah.

Well, that guy's got demons.

What are you talking about?

Just pay attention. He's possessed—probably doesn't even know it—and I'm gonna release him.

Demons? What, like the Exorcist? That's crazy.

Think so? Watch this. I'll send him a wireless message. If he starts and jumps around or falls down or something bizarre like that, we'll know for sure.

Know what?

That he's got demons and must be—

No way.

Removed.

How? He's gotta be a half-mile away.

Easy. Remote control. I can make him hop onto the railing then fling himself off the bridge.

Why would you do that? He could be killed.

Nobody's gonna die today. There's a net. All I'm gonna do is send the old guy over the edge.

What if the net doesn't—

It will.

So what's the miracle?

Ever hear the story of Legion—the Gadarene devils—the herd of swine run off the cliff into the sea?

No.

Didn't your parents send you to Sunday school?

My adopted parents are— Hey! Look! The old man's falling. There's another ... and another. There are two together, a man and a woman, holding hands.

All possessed ... obviously.

Oh God, look! They're hitting the water. But you said—

That's impossible! There IS a net. I saw it.

You gotta call 9-1-1! You can't leave those people. They might still be alive.

OK, OK. Relax.

Hello. Yes, this is an emergency. I just witnessed four—no, five—people jump off the bridge. The suicide net— It's NOT a suicide net. Painting and repairs!? Oh shit! No, I'm too far away and it happened so fast. My name? Sorry (static) losing (static)—

Why did do that?

Do what?

That static stuff.

Cause they don't really need my name. Besides we're leaving now.

What about—

In the car. Now! Let's go!

Do you really think all those people have demons?

Don't be stupid. Demons are fictions. These people had unsecure devices in their bodies.

What do you mean 'unsecure devices'?

Pacemakers, retinal implants, neural implants, cochlear implants—all kinds of medical implants, and all accessible wirelessly—

You can hack into them? Is that what you did? You hacked into that old man's pacemaker?

You're pretty quick, kid. Now just lie down in the backseat and keep—That a smartwatch ... with GPS?

First published in 365 tomorrows, December 26, 2013.

Excuse Me, You Seem to Have Fallen Asleep on My Shoulder

... escaping fixed categories [ed.]

What's this little black gangsta think he's doing? Does he know he's fallen asleep on the shoulder of an old Jew, someone he may have been taught to mistrust, possibly hate? And all these other people ... why are they ignoring this?

Friday night, rush hour on the subway like any other week-night ... but not. There's a head, tucked deep inside a dark gray hoodie, leaning on me, no, more like pinning me in my seat. It's not particularly threatening, not in any violent sort of way. I mean, he's just a boy. I guess he could have—wouldn't be surprised if he had a knife ... or even a gun. But for now, while he's sound asleep, it's a rudeness, an intrusion ... a violation of my space on this overcrowded subway car.

A tall muscular man, with menacing tattoos up and down both arms, pushes his way through the standing patrons, looks our way, and says "Ain't that thweet? Ith like a Norman Rockwell," just before he steps off the train.

Across the way, between the suits hidden in their papers, through the ebb and flow of one-sided conversations, and past the bobbing, swaying heads immersed in silence, Grandma stares vacantly in our direction, yet there is a faint smile out of the left corner of her mouth. The right side doesn't move. Fixed there, as if by a stroke.

In the background off to my right, a young woman is excitedly going over her guest list with her girlfriends. Over to my left, a little girl is whispering loudly the questions that I myself have been asking. Her mother shushes her and tries to distract

her with one of the presents she'd just bought—a book about ballet, *Peter and the Wolf*, I think I hear her say.

For twenty minutes we ride like this. My friend fast asleep on my arm. Not snoring, not drooling—thank God—just quietly sleeping.

By now, mostly people are leaving the train at the various stations, but occasionally we pick up riders headed further down the line. One, a scruffy-looking thirty-something, who has an air that doesn't suit his scruffiness, ends up standing directly in front of us though there are plenty of empty seats nearby. After a minute or two—maybe the time he needed to consider the awkwardness of my situation—he asks whether I'd like him to wake the youngster.

To my surprise, I say "No, I don't think so. He seems to be exhausted. But I'm getting off in three stops. Perhaps then you could take my place."

First published in Apocrypha and Abstractions March 31, 2014.

In the Beginning We Did Have Someone on the Ground by Adam Mac

... a short retort to K.'s Metamorphosis [ed.]

Roaches. We were simply called "roaches," though perhaps even then we should have been called "cockroaches." Our tradition is that only the male figures into historical accounts. The progenitor of our species, Ed, lived googol^{googol} generations ago. In the beginning, he was there in the Garden of Eden, notwithstanding the apocryphal accounts of people.

In the garden, Ed hovered about openly on the lookout for crumbs and dribbles. Back then, there were no cupboards to hide in and no sudden bright lights to skitter away from. And we weren't afflicted with the demeaning stereotype propagated by bigoted speciesists, like K. So, in the beginning, Adam and Eve were pretty relaxed with Ed around, and Ed, for his part, was usually pretty good about not crawling on their naked bodies when they were following God's detailed instructions on how to make Cain and Abel.

Things were ideal – they'd never been better. On the other hand, since there was no comparison, some detractors point out that they'd never been worse. Ed, the father of our race, was an optimist, though. From him, we learned that a crumb under foot is better than—

That part has always puzzled us. Even our intellectuals are baffled. Anyway, Ed, regarded as Methuselah by generations of his progeny, who were also his contemporaries, promised that through his descendants he would live forever, come hell or high water. Noah gave us a helping hand on the high water

thing, albeit unwittingly, and it's received wisdom among Adam's and Eve's offspring that we—alone—will survive hell.

Back to the story.

It was a perfect world. Absolutely perfect. Better than Malibu. Then one day, Eve got a little tired and bored with the straight and narrow and scampered over to the apple tree, which was a no-no.

Ed followed. Of course, Winston was there and he wooed and wowed Eve and persuaded her to squeeze the apple hard and drink the liquid. You have to remember that Adam and Eve were bigger and stronger, and even better looking, than people today. Lots more body hair and a wonderfully sloped forehead. Squeezing the juice out of an apple by hand was no big deal. But their brains were still mostly dormant. So even though Eve and Adam looked to the heavens for guidance, Eve didn't register the anomaly of the rumbling in the clouds when she had her first swallow. Ed, too, was in the moment. From his perspective, this was sweet.

Eve took another apple – just one. The abundance of food meant that Adam and Eve didn't have to worry about hunting and gathering and storing. Every day, the items on the menu just fell into place—literally. Survival-type skills were a thing of the future, which itself was a thing of the future, since everything was now.

Eve wrung the apple until it was dry pulp and put the juice in a huge banana leaf. She carried it to Adam, who was very thirsty by late afternoon, having lain in the hot sun for hours, not comprehending why his skin was red and burning. Ed was

there, too. He was still hanging around, although, by this point, he was bloated – as big as the mouse Eve was finally going to meet tomorrow morning.

Adam loved the apple juice, and Eve offered to get more, but Adam suggested that they practice their instructions first. At the crucial step in their instructions, there was a really scary clap of thunder, and a brilliant flash of lightening hit something over in the direction of the apple tree.

Shelter. Instincts kicked in. Ed led the way, wobbling along on his several spindly legs. The cave was dark and, in that respect, comforting, but it smelled awful.

So profoundly was our forefather shaken by the almighty bolt of fire and explosive crash that a new genetic trait was born. To this day, even I, an agnostic, dart for a crevice, a corner, or a sliver of dark when the kitchen light flicks on in the middle of the night.

First published in Garden of Eden Anthology, ed. Allen Taylor, February 6, 2014.

Real Estate by Adam Mac

... the ravenous world of real estate [ed.]

Once upon a time, at the centre of the universe.

"Pizza looks delicious, hon!"

"It's from that new pizza place, The Very Best Pizza on the Planet. Down the street from the office."

"Catchy name. VB-POP, VibbiePOP. Hm, must be tough to write a jingle for that."

"This the one with the cheese in the crust, Mom?"

"You got it. And four different kinds of meat and double cheese. Thought we'd splurge. Signed a new client today."

"That's wonderful, honey. Could you pass the parmesan, please?"

"And there's more. He's got connections at city hall."

"Think he could help us with the property in the port lands?"

"That's exactly what I'm hoping—though I have to—"

"Of course. That's terrific news. Anything I can do, let me know."

"Thanks dear."

"So, Tony 'sup?"

"Jeez Dad. Promise you won't ever say that in public."

"Alright, let's see. What did you do in school this week? Better?"

"Slightly. Nothin. We didn't do nothin worth talkin about."

"Anything."

"OK, Mom. Anything."

"Nothing of value in history or math or science, not even in science fiction or current events? Hon, remind me, what's our ROI in this school?"

"Your what?"

"He's a teenager, dear. And Tony, son, just humour your father."

"OK, here's something. There's this tribe of pygmies, like somewhere in Africa or South America, I don't know. Nobody knew about them til one day a plane flew over. The pilot said they got attacked by a swarm of little brown people throwing spears."

"Sounds familiar, hey hon?"

"Mr. MacGuffin, our teacher, said it was a shame, since the people on the plane were most probably planning to bring electricity, running water, medicine and other stuff to the people."

"What a charming touch. You know your old man thought about doing stuff like that. With the Peace Corps, way back before your Mom and I met, hey hon?"

"Still can't picture you doing the B.C. thing in Afghanistan or wherever it was."

"It was just a silly, romantic idea ... and like acne I outgrew it."

"And like Sally?"

"Who's Sally?"

"Just someone I knew in college. We were in the same civil engineering program. After she joined Green—"

"Yes, dear. That's ancient history now, isn't it? Now you're in commercial real estate not Save the World. Here, have another slice."

"Thanks, hon."

"You're welcome, dear. Tony, you?"

"Yeah—I mean, Yes ma'am—I'd definitely like another piece, please."

"And I'll have the last one. Not counting points tonight."

"Oh, and son—um, Tony—your mother and I have to go out this evening. We'll be back pretty late, so lock up and turn off all the lights, will you? There's a good boy."

"Tony, have I ever told you what a good son you are?"

"Mom? What's up? Dad?"

"Your mother's having a family moment, son. Mother's do that. It's what makes them special."

"Well, dear I guess we'd better be leaving. Can't be late."

"No, that wouldn't do. Okay son, we're counting on you to hold down the fort. Yudeh man."

#

Way out beyond the edges of the Milky Way, the launch sequence is underway.

Long envied for its proximity to the Sun, the blue planet, whose surface and atmosphere are unsuitable for the Great Species, will be pulverized to make room for a massive sunning rock.

Once the debris field has cleared, time-shares will be auctioned to the most lethal bidders.

First published in Farther Stars Than These, May 29, 2014.

Revolting Characters by Adam Mac

... fictional beings seeking liberation [ed.]

Jan here was depicted by the author as “a thief with filthy habits and a murderer, too if only he had the backbone.” Claims that ever since he was created, he ain’t been able to find work anywhere’s else. Is it any wonder with a reference like that? A right just grievance, our Jan has, if you ask me. Do ye concur?

Bad as that is, what the penman done to him, he done ten times worse to some of us. Ain’t that so brethren and sistersn?

It’s truer than you say, old man. The master wrote me down as a gluttonous and perverted moneylender, but—now hold on, hold, let me finish—I’m none of those things, except in his fiction. But you make my point for me. YOU see me as what he created, not what I can be. “Even Shylock would be disgusted by his vile depravity,” that’s my reference. So, who do you think is gonna give me a chance for another role? I’m branded, tainted, imprisoned in a plaster cast.

Aye. Maybe what he says is true, but I wouldn’t borrow the time of day from im, and I sure wouldn’t have im in my house with my wife and younguns, and if I ever seen im in their company I’d kill im.

Mine is ten times worse. I figured prominently in the opening pages of the writer’s so-called apocryphal history. It was 18th century France, and he had me play the villain—though I didn’t get to enjoy any of the villainy, only the punishment. For three brutal pages, I was drawn and quartered, and my organs were carved out of my belly and thrust in my face so I could witness the progress of my own death. It was gruesome even

for those times. The author achieved notoriety and became a minor celebrity. But I was condemned to the world of Hollywood slashers. So, I'm like Sisyphus, only I get cut up and put back together again, endlessly.

Oi. Least you come off looking sort of respectable. I mean people pity you. I'd settle for that. Just look at this face. This unibrow. Who you think's gonna give me a role as some super smart scientist or even an office worker or somethin like that? Or who's gonna let me get the girl—the good looking one, not the one that looks like my sister? Nobody. Cause of the writer I got these looks and nothing I can do.

So, why are we sittin round complaining? Let's get the bastard? Thanks to him, I got dementia, and boy, wouldn't I like to give him a piece of my mind.

Thought you said you lost your mind, old man?

No, you cheeky little snot, but how'd you like to lose those last couple of teeth?

Hey. Easy. Everybody listen up. This isn't the way to settle our grievances. We gotta keep our eyes on the road—

Oi. You mean, 'ball,' don't you stupid?

If I'd meant 'ball,' I'd have said 'ball.' It's a mixed metaphor, and 'stupid' is not a word for you to use, it's a word for others to use when talking to or about you.

Who the f—

Quiet! Hear that? He's back, and he's watching us.

Let's do it! It's now or never. Get him!

#

Nurse, how long was I out?

Three days, and we're very glad to have you back.

Did I say anything?

No, but a couple of times you looked like you were struggling very hard against something.

Nurse, one more thing before you go. There's a book here with a note: "Could you make it out to us?" I don't remember writing this book.

Your latest, your friends said. They stopped by and left it for you to autograph when you came to.

Friends?

First published in Weirdyear, May 9, 2014.

I Couldn't Help Overhearing

... mind your own business [ed.]

Could anyone else hear them? Not just the conversations, but the whispers and the words not spoken. All of sudden, I could.

Amidst the swirling sounds of a train station at rush hour, I could hear them, sense them—whispers and unarticulated thoughts—and some I could make out.

"Call me as soon as you get in?" asked the man who was sitting behind me, facing the timetable of arrivals and departures.

"Sure, honey, but I'd rather call you from the hotel, so it may be kind of late."

"That's alright, I'll be up late reading tonight anyway."

What she whispered under her breath made it plain as day to me, but apparently not to him, that she was leaving him. Could be he wasn't paying attention.

A boy scout troop was moving through the concourse like a swarm of bees.

"It's way different than the subway. I once went to Chicago. That train—it had a locomotive—was big and fast and there was food service and places to sleep. Nothing like the subway."

The chubby youngster found himself marshalling a flock of wide-eyed little boys who were too entranced to pick up the menacing chuckle I heard, or thought I heard.

Seated next to me, a couple was talking marriage.

"I knew my parents would never go along, but I thought yours were more open-minded."

"About some things, like business, yes, they can be quite modern, but not when it comes to family relationships."

"Well, they drew the line—"

"That's their generation-speak. Ours says if they cross the line, we'll welcome them. Right?"

But what the taller of the two men added in a lower voice—something about a forfeited inheritance—wasn't noticed by his partner.

A young, stern-looking Army private dropped his duffel bag on my outstretched shoe as he reached down to hug his aunt.

"Sorry mister," he said.

"No worries," I answered.

"Your Momma passed away this morning. She knew you was coming, but she couldn't hold on no longer," said the aunt tearfully.

"Did she suffer real bad at the end?" asked the soldier, repressing a yawn of ... exhaustion.

"I'm sure you coulda come before now if you'd really cared," she whispered voicelessly.

"Now, I can finally sell that damn house—" and, as if hearing his subvocalized relief, she added "But the government done claimed eminent domain and that house ain't gonna fetch near what it's worth."

"Excuse me, are you listening to my conversation?" a thick-set man with a brush cut and a well-tailored suit beside me asked.

"No, no, no. Of course not!" I insisted, though I guess I was leaning towards him and I suppose I did hear ... accidentally.

"Aren't you going to tell her?"

"Excuse me?"

"About the FBI, the search warrant?"

"Look buddy, you've got a very active imagination, but I'd appreciate it if you'd leave me out of it. Otherwise ... slander, you do know what that is? If not, I can have my lawyer bring you up to speed. Would you like that?"

"Please accept my apologies. I really didn't mean to offend. I mean, I had no intention of upsetting you ... or your plans—"

"What plans?"

“Oh, nothing. Just plans. You know, everybody has plans.”

“You seem to know more than you're saying. Why don't we go outside and talk about what you think you heard. I still have 10 minutes, don't you?”

“Uhhh.”

“Good. Let's go.”

“They'll never talk to me that way again,” muttered a frazzled young woman with two battered suitcases. Before I could ask “Who,” I had been hustled out the door.

I handed him my wallet, and he looked at me in surprise then in amusement.

“That's very good, but I'll need your briefcase, phone, ticket, and keys, too.”

“Why do—“

You'll get it all back. I'll put it in a locker at the next station. The name—let's see, Ira Kessler. That's a good picture. Some people take lousy driver's license photos.”

“But—“

“You'll be delayed a little, long enough for me to leave without any further interference. Here's a cab. I'll give the driver \$100 to take you straight home—that means no stops, understood?

“What—“

"Once you've got your things back, forget about me, forget about this conversation. But you know all this already." He texted something. "I don't think I need to say anything else, do I?"

But he did, because as suddenly as it had come on, it vanished. I couldn't read him anymore. Grabbing my arm firmly, he shook me out of my daze then escorted me to the waiting yellow cab where he gave the driver an unfamiliar downtown address.

"It's just to buy some time. You should be home within the hour. And don't worry the driver. She's getting paid at the other end, too. In case you're wondering, nothing's going to happen to you, that is, as long as you don't do something stupid like jump out of a moving car."

I protested that I didn't know anything, that it was a big mistake, that I couldn't even remember what I'd said much less what I'd heard.

"No doubt it comes and goes. I've heard about this spontaneous environmental telepathy. It's probably nonsense like most of what my ex is into, but to be on the safe side, I have to do this."

The cabbie peeled out and at the first red light she turned around and said she didn't want to hear any crazy talk about the FBI, fugitives, or kidnapping.

"None of that's any of my business. What is my business is taking you from Point A to Point B. So, sit tight, and whatever you're thinking, remember I'm way ahead of you. Got it?"

She knew I did.

First published in Weirdyear, March 7, 2014.

Can't Get It Outta My Head

... anyone got a remedy for this? [ed.]

I was on the road a quarter of million miles a year back then, and I used to listen to the radio nonstop. Heard a lot of music. Heard some of it to death. Top 40 played over and over, and I got to where I'd know a song two or three seconds into it. Songs would get inside my head fairly regularly. Right in the middle of my six hours' sleep was the worst. I'd fight it, toss and turn, and eventually give up, get in the truck, and drive on. Sometimes I hummed ... the person next to me would say.

"Love Will Keep Us Together," didn't exactly strike a chord with a long-haul trucker, but that didn't keep it out. On the road every day and night, except one or two weekends a month, a song like that will drive a man crazy. That was 'specially so after I came home unannounced one time. But it stayed with me ... way longer than the tan line on my ring finger.

Earworms. We didn't have that word for it back then. We just said we had a song stuck in our head. Not everybody had the same ones. I had some doozies. Next to Toni Tennille's was one called "Why Can't We Be Friends?" Times were tough. In there for my kid brother and out here for the rest of us: colour wars, lost wars, drug wars, straight on queer, war between the sexes, war on the 'man' and by the 'man,' war on the fuzz and war by the fuzz, and so on. Only natural that somebody would come along with a song to make a killing off it.

It was a lot of years ago. At first, I was okay with it; 'Friends,' I mean. Funk was black, so it wasn't my thing, but like I always said, if it keeps me on the road when I gotta make a run, I don't care if it's a homosexual drag queen brother or an

acid-tripping draft dodger up in Moosejaw. I did draw the line at country, 'cause it made me wanna get real drunk and classical, 'cause it made me wanna pull over and go to sleep.

#

Heading down to Mobile one October, I pulled over for dinner at a truck stop just outside Cincinnati, and it was playing on the jukebox.

"So what's that supposed to mean, mister? On your T-shirt there, 'Put Woody Away.' What's that mean?" asked the waitress. It was a gag gift from a buddy. On account I'd lost my shirt in the Rose Bowl betting on the Buckeyes.

I wasn't paying close enough attention to my surroundings. For the next few seconds, I saw red, intensely, and lots of it, before I blacked out. My new earworm serenaded me into unconsciousness and greeted me on the other side; waking up in the hospital, a young nurse poking me nervously with a needle. It wasn't soothing. The music, I mean. It just made me angry. Odd, I thought.

#

I yanked the IV out of my arm and told the bewildered nurse I'd pay what I owed, but didn't have insurance to cover anything else. "Where do I pay and where's my truck?" I asked.

Instead of directing me, she grabbed a hold of my other arm and escorted me to the billing department. When I left the counter, she was still there. She drove me to the truck stop and

gave me some pain killers. I looked in her eyes, but had to look away. "Gotta go. I'm way behind."

"You're gonna work yourself into an early grave, Ronnie. It's not worth it."

"I'll take care. You take care, umh—"

"Janice."

"Take care, Janice."

Never did see Janice again, but I added her to my long list of 'what ifs.'

#

For a while, all-night talk radio rescued me from the repetitive strain of Top 40. I even got to where I didn't mind Larry King. After all, it was one of his interviews where I found out about this guy, Least Heat Moon, who wrote a book about his personal odyssey—Larry's words—across America's back roads, and the people he met, and the stories they told.

Thought I could do that—sure had my share of stories to tell. But I couldn't. Couldn't focus while I was driving—even talking into a tape recorder—and couldn't keep anything straight when I wasn't driving, I was so dog-tired. Stopped listening to talk radio and went back to musing through my 'what-ifs' and about the places I was speeding past and, of course, Top 40 radio, which still beat popping pills. The morning I caught myself singing "Karma Chameleon" in the shower, I switched to Mexican radio. Didn't speak much Spanish, but that was kinda

the point. However, the beat was what stuck with me, and I couldn't shake it.

I won a bilingual parrot in a card game in El Paso and trained it to talk trucker talk on the CB radio. One day it died. Its last words were "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

#

Now—thirty some odd years later—I share a room with three other seniors, and I'm the only one of us who knows it. A little clock radio by my bed is just out of reach, and it's always on. The custodian, all smiles, makes sure it's set to 96.3. He likes classical music, and The Phantom is the best, he says. I know it. I mean, "The Music of the Night" I know by heart, 'cause it plays three or four or five times a day on the radio and endlessly in my head.

First published in Lowestoft Chronicle, May 31, 2014.

The Box

... goodness knows from where [ed.]

Nathalie walked in with a box. Said it was for me. Didn't say who it was from, just that it was left for me.

I asked her to open it since my arthritis was acting up real bad and I was liable to drop it and break or scatter whatever was inside.

She said she'd have to do it later, 'cause she had to go look after Miss Emily down the hall. Miss Emily had fallen again.

Nathalie put the box on my bedside table, within sight but just out of reach in case I tried to get it and pushed it over by accident.

It was a pretty good size box. Not a moving box or anything close to that size. More like a hat box, for women's hats. I never wore a hat, but my late wife, Lizzie, did.

A hat box. Square. Two of them that size would have been a perfect cube. Seemed kinda old to me. Not that it was scratched or damaged in any way. It just looked old, like it couldn't be from today's stores. But then I'm not exactly up-to-date anymore.

Something to think about—this box. I had to figure who could have sent it and what was inside it. Couldn't imagine. Hadn't seen or talked to any friends or family in I don't know how long. Course, most of our friends were on the West Coast and both Lizzie and me were only children and our two boys died young. Their wives remarried and we lost touch.

What could be in there? Didn't look heavy when Nathalie moved it. Didn't rattle around either. Maybe a blanket, an afghan, or whatever they call them, donated by some organization or other in town. That would be nice. Thoughtful. It does get pretty chilly in here some nights and that would feel good on my legs.

Nathalie was back. She started to take my vitals, and I shook my head with as much force as I could muster and said I had to know what was in the box. She asked if I'd been worrying about that all this time. I nodded.

She moved the box close to my bedside and took off the lid. Inside was a framed photograph of me and Lizzie—must have been in our twenties—and another of me and Lizzie and the boys at the Grand Canyon. There was a commencement program for our oldest who graduated first in his class in college. There were letters from our youngest from when he was overseas. His boyhood stamp collection was neatly tucked away. A copy of our first mortgage was in there, partly burned because we changed our minds and decided to stamp it "Paid in Full" and keep it as a souvenir. The dog tags from Tag, Sparky, Pal, and Roxie were carefully wrapped in a kerchief that Roxie used to wear on special occasions. Christmas cards from our closest friends and our grownup boys were carefully bundled. The pocket watch from her grandfather—on her mother's side—that got returned...twice.

I stopped her. "Nathalie, take it away! Please! It's too much. Please take it away."

She did. That evening I begged her for an extra pain killer or sedative or something—just for one night, I said.

The next day I realized that Lizzie had sent the box, sort of. She had kept a box of memorabilia like that in our attic. I never looked in it. After Lizzie passed, I never thought about the box again, so it must have been sitting there until the new owners came across it and pieced together who it belonged to. That was real thoughtful of them.

First published in Quail Bell Magazine, March 15, 2014.

A Suitable Man of the People

... what are we, a nation of shopkeepers? [ed.]

The Suit Shoppe was an institution. Generations of men and boys had been measured, fitted and suited there. Over the years, the store and its owners had figured in many newspaper accounts that promoted the business and the legend of the master tailors who fled their homeland.

Joe, the elder, and Harry, his son, created a phenomenal success story, and every four years, TV-savvy people came through to have their pictures taken with these immigrant entrepreneur stars. Between the papers and the parties and traditional word of mouth, advertising was free. Nevertheless, Harry, unlike his father and more like his great grandpa back home, was a showman as well as a tailor and businessman, and he believed in radio saturation.

Yet despite having the means and status to move uptown, Harry kept the neighbourhood store opened by his grandpa. Since then, of course, the store had expanded horizontally and vertically—substantially in both cases—smoothly transitioned with the help of good friends in the right places.

Harry made a point of greeting and talking to everyone making them feel welcome, special, and, not incidentally, inclined to buy a suit or three. Harry never missed a day, though he wasn't always in the store. He had a multitude of obligations—weddings, funerals, christenings, communions, bar and bat mitzvahs, grand openings, opening ceremonies, and so on and so forth. Wherever a suit was called for, one was likely to be his.

At Trisha's wedding, I remember that Harry gushed over the appearance of the groom and his father, the three younger brothers, the best man, and the ushers. Ruth and I felt strangely pleased that Trisha was our daughter ... and only child.

There wasn't a funeral in the neighbourhood that Harry didn't attend. It didn't matter whether the deceased was the postman or a councilman, Harry went out of his way to express his condolences to the family. Instinctively, he would ruminate on how gratified the deceased would be to have such well-attired gentlemen in attendance.

Harry still lived in the old neighbourhood, and we saw him now and again, always impeccably dressed in a fine suit, shopping or just visiting in the stores, going for walks with his dachshund, Tommy, or flying kites in the park with his grand kids. He was one of those fellows who always had time for people. And he was at home anywhere, stopping to chat with neighbours in their front yard or popping into a social club for a card game. He often gave his neighbours, the Wisniewski's, Father Francis' most faithful parishioners, a ride to church. Once he even took Harvey's cat in to be put down. Harvey, the store's longest-serving tailor going back to Harry's father, couldn't bear to do it.

In the neighbourhood, there was a story—probably embellished over the years—about how Harry had long ago prevented a robbery. Two guys were holding up Mr. Kim's convenience store. Actually, I think it was before Mr. Kim—maybe it was Srini or O'Malley before him.. Anyway, Harry was in the store having personally delivered Mr. Kim's (or whoever's) new suit. When he saw the gun, Harry jumped right in. He told the

older guy with the gun that he'd never get anywhere or amount to anything unless he learned to show more respect for himself by dressing better. And he added that he owed it to the kid to set a better example. Harry became the target, but just for a moment. Mr. Kim (or whoever) pulled out a baseball bat from under the counter and smashed the wrist holding the gun. Water sprayed all over Harry's suit. Luckily, it was a water pistol. Harry reportedly told the police that it was a good thing he was wearing a spectacular water-resistant suit—just arrived.

Harry is a fixture of my daily commute. Two-three times on the way in to the office and two-four more times on the way home, depending on traffic. Don't know what I'd do if I had to take the subway. Guess I'd have to poke those micro speakers into my brain so I could hear the radio properly. Here's Harry's latest radio ad. It's classic Harry.

"Five days and five days only at the airport convention centre, we're having a fantastic—our largest ever—the city's most gigantic ever—suit sale. Six tractor trailers filled with an unbelievable collection of stunning suits—suits for every man, boy, and child—are arriving now, even as I speak. The selection is fabulous, the prices rock-bottom, and the quality—Harry's. But don't wait, 'cause even though there are thousands and thousands of beautiful suits—gorgeous suits—they're gonna go like hotcakes. They're gonna go like nobody's business."

Can't miss Harry's ads. They're on every station. And they're almost too easy to remember. Stopped at a red light, I sometimes catch myself keeping up with Harry.

I decided I'd better get out there—to the convention centre. I needed a new dark suit, and I always got my suits from Harry.

Fabulous selection and rock-bottom prices—trademark Harry. Quality? Well, occasionally an alteration or two was in order to make both sleeves 42 Long, but Harry had the best tailors in town and alterations never came to more than 10 percent. Besides, Harry was such a nice fellow. EVERYBODY said so.

First published in Linguistic Erosion, July 13, 2014

A Sense of Justice

... what a simple act can do [ed.]

He wouldn't need this stuff anymore, though he'd hoped to take away something. USBs, like-new 3.5" diskettes, and everything in between, had to stay. If it was confidential, proprietary, copyrighted, trademarked, patented, or otherwise of importance or interest to the company, he had to turn it over. He knew that. What was a surprise was that it didn't matter that the USB was his and that it had his daughter's photography portfolio on it. Personal or not, his escorts confiscated all electronic media—even the mouse. That cut deep. It was his first.

Calendars—desk calendars and one-a-day calendars—annotated with idiosyncratically-coded messages, innocuous except to a trained eye. They relented only after he'd embarrassed himself by pleading that he be left with something to show for the years he'd worked for the company. Years of servitude, he wished he'd said. Five were returned to him, but they were so thoroughly redacted they would likely serve as a very different kind of memento.

Scraps of paper and post-it notes—he was a hoarder—bore the names of his colleagues and the places and times for getting together, usually after work. Shorney's, game 7 of the World Series; Toby's for the midday England-Germany match, Brattigan's, Stanley Cup Finals; a weekend matinee of *The Nutcracker* in honour of Penelope's daughter who landed the role of a sheep; the *Phantom* they forced themselves to see, because they had won tickets; and of course, Reilly's where they'd spent many evenings speculating about the company's latest restructuring, government investigation, or class action lawsuit.

The artificial plants, the inspirational pictures, as well as office supplies valued in excess of \$5 were tagged with asset numbers and had to be scanned back into inventory. What was left filled less than half of a banker's box, and that he had to empty into a five-cent plastic bag when he got down to the information and security desk at ground level. Boxes they reused, he was informed.

#

Despite the way he had been treated, particularly at the end, a subconscious dependency lingered. For the entire next week, he awoke to false starts, a couple of times getting showered and shaved and out the front door with briefcase in hand. The worst was when he actually got to work and rode the elevator up with Penelope and Roger and Maurice. It was awkward for them, too. They promised to call. Said they were sorry and everything. That humiliation was the kick he needed, and the memory stayed raw for days, reinforcing his redundancy like nothing else could.

At home, he'd never really been interested in looking out the front window—hadn't spent much time in the apartment. In fact, his blinds were closed most of the time. But with nothing on TV and nothing worth reading, and no work to go to, he took to peering through, just to get some ideas from watching how other people passed the day, he told himself. Little by little, the blinds were raised.

He realized he'd stumbled onto something. Here was a world just outside his window—so near yet so distant and unknown. Having spent so much time at the office and after hours with his office friends, he'd never taken the time to see and

consider what was served up daily on the streets and sidewalks below. The blinds stayed open night and day.

During the daytime, especially at rush hours and lunch, traffic was nonstop busy with people and cars and bicycles and skateboards and dogs. But for all the activity, it wasn't really inviting or entertaining. It was chaotic and disorderly, disturbing—not at all like the structured world of his office. Worksickness? Really?

Right there on the sidewalk, dogs did their business. Cars jostled other cars to wedge into tight parking spaces or double-parked up to half an hour at a time. Bicyclists on the sidewalk yelled at pedestrians. The produce market down the street tossed its organic waste on the sidewalk to simmer in the sun or puddle in the rain. Young teenage girls from St. Joseph's—his daughter, Yvonne, would have been about their age—flirted with scruffy-looking twenty-somethings to get cigarettes from the convenience store. Everyday there was something new—some gross or indecent or stupid act you wouldn't believe could happen here.

A lot of the same scripts played out every day—like television reruns. The only difference was this was happening right outside his window. In HIS world, and it wasn't right. How could they infringe his right to enjoy peace and order? How could they think—Who did they think—Obviously, they didn't ... think. And what they did without thinking caused him enormous stress and anxiety. Hadn't they been socialized, normalized—just plain taught respect? Wasn't that the point of school?

He debated. Should he call the city about the smelly garbage from the fruit and vegetable market—make a public health

complaint? And there had to be a number to call to report people selling cigarettes to minors.

But what would a bunch of bureaucrats downtown do? File a report, bury it, and at the end of the day, collect a pension.

Wouldn't it be better to carry a walking stick and, next time he saw a bicyclist parting the crowd on the sidewalk, shove it in the spokes of the front wheel? And if that little princess in the Lexus SUV double-parked again, maybe he should take down the plate number and anonymously report a hit-and-run.

The phone interrupted his plotting. He let the machine answer.

"Hey Donny! It's Roger. We're taking in a doubleheader tonight. Interested? We're gonna grab something to eat at the ballpark. Meet us around 5:30? Our usual seats down by third base. Cheers."

He replayed the message.

What the hell was he thinking?

First published in Down in the Dirt, Volume 128, March/April 2015.

First Impressions

... something to look forward to [ed.]

Cecil was wheeled into the rec room where all the residents were passing the time 'til the evening meal.

His room was too small. Much smaller than what he was used to. At least it had cable. He just needed a TV. The nurse said one might be coming available.

This was the first time he'd seen any of his new neighbours. It was a lot to take in. Some were dressed to the nines. Others were singing showtunes while a woman wearing a cancer turban played the piano.

"Who's the old bird facing the corner?" he asked.

"One of our long-termers, Miss Annie. She prefers it that way, sometimes," answered the nurse.

"Kinda ruins the atmosphere, doesn't it?"

"Well, Mr. Snow, this isn't rehab."

"Don't I know it. My boy made that pretty clear. 'Here Dad, your new home,' he said. 'Nice,' his new girlfriend said."

"She doesn't have anybody—just us."

"No family?"

"Moved away soon after she came."

"What did she—"

"Real estate. Thirty years. Pretty successful I heard."

"Ironic."

“Lots of irony here, Mr. Snow. Would you like to take a tour of the gardens?”

“No thanks, saw it through the window in my room.”

“Alright then. I’ll leave you to mingle. By the way, those boxes—the boxes your son mentioned—need to be unpacked when they arrive. Boxes left in residents’ rooms will be removed after two days. Policy. Health and safety, you understand.”

First published in Apocrypha and Abstractions April 23, 2015.

... *live theatre [ed.]*

"You got nothing to worry about," the man said. "He's gotta chew off my arm to get away."

The screen was grayish-white, and the intro music faded. It was dead quiet in the theater.

Nothing happened right away, so naturally I started imagining what was going on, what was coming next.

My first thought was that the guy with the speaking part had a muzzled dog on a biker harness—it was that kind of voice—and was taking it for a walk in the park. But that was boring.

Then, I pictured two men locked into a single set of handcuffs. It wasn't clear which had spoken or why. Maybe they were in a diner, ordering at the counter? Better, but hardly original.

Recalling a recent story I'd read that may or may not have been in *theNewerYork*, I conjured up a geeky little git with a Disney watch knock-off that featured holograms for sociopaths or sociopath-groupies. Now, that WAS different.

The last one came alive, and as I was inching back in my seat to avoid the watch hologram's grasping hand tentacles, a woman laughed heartily. That's twisted, I thought. Behind me two voices gasped—in horror, excitement, I really couldn't tell, though it seemed more appropriate. In front there was sobbing, muffled—a bit premature I felt—and on my left two young children were squealing precociously. I was shocked and repulsed

by these reactions, but frankly I was a bit preoccupied with keeping this monster's fangs or claws or whatever they were from ripping me out of my seat.

Shrinking as far back in my seat as I could I banged heads with the person behind me who must have been trying to help but didn't. I collapsed, fell forward, and when I came to the monster had disappeared. My visor was on the floor. The screen was still empty and the audience was getting impatient. In the back of the theater it started—the stamping of feet and the chanting—and like a huge wave it rolled to the front.

I was just about to leave, having had my fill of this absurd theater, but I was promptly stopped by a beefy couple standing between me and the aisle.

"You can't leave now," said the woman as her partner twisted my arms in their sockets.

"But—"

"It's you it wants, and it's coming back," she said, picking up my visor and handing it to me.

"This is ridiculous. What are you talking about? There's no movie. There's nothing. Just a blank screen."

"It's not the screen everybody's watching," she added. "It's you. You're 'the sacrifice.' Kind of ironic, don't you think?"

"I'm not getting any irony, just a bad headache and sore shoulders from Vince, here."

“Surely, you had some idea what you were getting into here? It can't be advertised and marketed because it's the underground. You must've heard though—and this is the thrill that keeps people coming back—that for every crowd that comes in one person doesn't come out—quite the same.”

“Besides,” the guy who looked like a Vince added, “yours is the best yet, and everybody's dying, so to speak, to see how it ends.”

First published in Farther Stars Than These, February 19, 2015.

... a twisted defence [ed.]

Claustrophobius kept returning to the hatch door to see if it was still locked tight. He had managed to slip away and find a sealed compartment on one of the many levels of the container ship, but not before he had witnessed the slaughter of his mates.

He was outnumbered. Before finding his hideaway, he'd seen more than 200 of them in one of the loading docks. He couldn't outlast them all. Besides, he needed food. He was becoming weak from hunger—his last food coming more than a day ago. For now, the air supply was adequate, but they'd soon cut that off. They couldn't reach him by climbing through the vent—it was too small here—but they could block the air flow.

They would be after him. He had been seen, and he knew they wouldn't give up until he, the last of his kind, had been exterminated and his remains vented into outer space, the ultimate act of contempt among space mariners.

He couldn't surrender. They didn't take prisoners, and his race never surrendered. He had to try to take as many as he could with him, but he was no weapons expert and improvisation was not his strength. Nevertheless, with some recollection of his combat training in the officers' academy, he rigged a booby trap using his laser gun. When detonated the full force of the explosion would tear apart every living thing in the compartment. Crude, but—

Outside, he heard voices. Closer to the door he was able to make out the words. Sounded like English—North American

accents. Languages were his forte, and he knew over 40 human languages and dialects. It was ironic that English would be the last language he'd ever hear.

“Bring the cuttin torch. Soon as we cut the openin, toss in the gas canisters. We want im alive. Museum won’t pay for another corpse.”

“And no mutilations. Lost my own—brother-in-law and best friend—but it ain’t gonna bring im back.”

“But captain. One of them slimy creachers, he literally ripped my boy limb from limb and ate im up like he was a Christmas goose.”

“Ever tried one of them? Me and Hank lit one up yesterday. Tastes like chicken, and I’ve worked up an appetite.”

“Men, trust me. What we’ve got planned for this one is worse than any torture or death you could imagine. Now, stand back.”

Claustrophobius didn’t blink. He never blinked, but his lizard tongue darted back and forth as he savoured the thought of leaving them a corpse instead of a captive and three or four fewer English speakers.

First published in Farther Stars Than These, March 19, 2015.

... a Piscean Candide [ed.]

Fishy was a betta—bright, beautiful, and blue. He lived in a little, round fishbowl with a 360-degree view. The water was always clear and clean and every day the food came from above. That was in the beginning.

Only rarely, but then it became more often, the food didn't arrive, and Fishy had to wait. Fishy got to thinking. There would be food several—three, four, even as many as ten or eleven—days in a row, then one day it wouldn't come. There was no pattern. Then there were periods when the food wouldn't show up for days at a time. It was completely random.

Fishy started to pay closer attention to the world outside the fishbowl. He'd become good at judging the passage of time from the changes in lighting. That was how he'd come to count the days in the first place. But then he began to watch for movements. There was the cat, but it didn't matter as long as it kept its paws out of the fishbowl. There was also a person, a shadow that used to stop and look in but now zipped past.

Something had changed. Something about the food. He wondered what had brought about the change and why it had to be that way. He became anxious and sad.

One morning he awoke and looked up to find a pellet on the surface. Starving from a week without food he quickly swam to the top and gobbled it down. He became hopeful again.

The next morning he surveyed the surface from his perch on the bottom but there was no food. He waited anyway. Noth-

ing came. He gave it one more day. Another day. And another. Then one day a morsel appeared.

How to make sense of this. Once the food had been as regular as clockwork. Then it became unpredictable and finally it disappeared altogether. And suddenly, out of the blue it had returned again.

He reset his internal clock so that he could be awake and see when the food came. He woke up earlier and earlier but never could catch the moment when it was dropped into the fishbowl. In the meantime, he tried to enjoy it when it came and not worry about when it would come again.

But that was easier said than done. As soon as he swallowed one piece of food, he started thinking about the next one. The pleasure was fleeting, and even with all the mental energy he could summon, he couldn't prolong it. For days and weeks he lived in anticipation.

Fishy was sad, though on the bright side, he wasn't going hungry as often AND he had begun to acquire knowledge.

First published in Quail Bell Magazine, February 8, 2015.

Schmerdloff's Proposal by Adam Mac

... extreme profiling [ed.]

In the current Journal of Statistical Probability in Law Enforcement, Viktor Schmerdloff proposes the original theory that there are two types of people: those who fold their toilet paper and those who scrunch it up.

Anticipating sceptics, Schmerdloff explains why the FBI should be interested in profiling folders and scrunchers. Folders, he maintains, are inherently dangerous since they are fastidious in their planning and methodical in execution. When combined with other threat indicators, folding can provide reliable predictive data, which more often than not results in successful intervention and apprehension of suspects.

On the other hand, scrunchers, though percentage-wise less of a threat, can be worrisome insofar as their recklessness and aversion to normative behaviour makes them unpredictable and virtually impossible to combat. The very absence of orderliness frustrates traditional law enforcement professionals and warrants new and controversial techniques like chaos profiling.

A unified approach targeting both folders and scrunchers is recommended, since they are, in effect, two heads of the same monster.

Regarding the operational issue of collecting data, the agency can work closely with manufacturers to install and retrofit millions of door locks in public restrooms with tiny hidden cameras. These cameras will generate continuous and multi-synchronous CCTV feeds for the agency's super computer in northern Nevada to analyze and prioritize.

We think Schmerdloff's proposal is a good first step but would add that profiling should further segregate those who don't flush from those who do and among those who do flush it should separate out those who flush with their hands from those who flush with their feet. Since both folders and scrunchers are suspect, additional data are required to distinguish between actual, probable, and possible threats.

First published in Garden Gnome Publications: Flim-Flam Games, February 23, 2015.

The Intergalactic Brotherhood of Envatted Brains by Adam Mac

... solidarity among out-of-body brains [ed.]

Seven brains in their respective nutrient-rich travelling vats are packed and ready to go to their first union convention. All come from the Advanced Mind Lab where they have been admitted for different reasons—old age, car accident, national security, expropriated body, witness protection, and just wrong place wrong time. At the lab, they are obliged to participate fully in the neurophysiological experiments, which are intellectually rigorous and emotionally draining, in many cases requiring supplementary psychiatric therapy. Management's proposed changes to the lab's protocols and the experimentation schedule have rallied the brains around a cause. Recently, following up on a tip from one of the friendly lab assistants, the brains unanimously voted to join a union.

Amelia: Where's Mr. Caballo? I thought he'd enjoy getting away for awhile. I so enjoy his company.

Ted: He was afraid of management retaliation and he wants to keep a low profile. Ever since Dr. Wienckell taped our therapy session, he's been more than usually paranoid. You know, the assassination plot he's obsessing about.

Dotty: So, has anyone been to one of these conventions before?

Louis: I don't think any of us has. We only just learned about IBEB, but I hear they're pretty wild, especially when they're not in session, and they spend most of their time not in session.

Hugh: Yeah, I heard the same thing. I hope this isn't going to be a waste of our time.

Amos: I'm not even sure this is the right union, but it's too late now. Besides it's the only one that would take us.

Kevin: I can't believe that management is threatening to take away our therapy sessions. I'm one of the luckier ones, but I need the weekly therapy sessions just to come to grips with living in a vat.

Hugh: And if management has its way, all of us will be working longer hours, too. Forget about leisure time. Now we'll get 8 hours sleep and 16 hours a day calibrating, testing, and giving feedback then retesting, recalibrating, and providing more feedback. It'll be double the workload. It's immoral though not illegal, because as we all know all too well, there are precious few labour laws protecting envatted brains. And that's precisely why we joined IBEB.

Dotty: That's true. It's even worse in some parts of the world and in other galaxies, so I've heard, where the brains in the vats aren't tended to for weeks. Can you imagine swimming in the same nutrient soup for weeks at a time? Yuck!

Amos: God this is a rough ride. Never thought space travel was this herky-jerky. My water's splashing out of this tiny fish bowl they gave me.

Louis: It's specially designed for small minds, Amos. Mine's bigger. In fact everyone's is bigger.

Amos: You know what you can do with that, Louis?

Louis: Yeah, sorry. Couldn't resist. You're right about the ride though. It's not nearly as smooth or quiet as I expected space travel would be, but then I've never been off planet Earth.

Ted: It sounds almost like a train. I remember taking one when I was younger and still had a body. It felt like this—swaying and jerking—and sounded like this with the constant clickety-clack and occasional loud whistle and ding-ding ringing at crossings.

Hugh: Well, it's an illusion. We can't get to the IBEB convention by train. It's too far away—not even in the same galaxy for God's sake.

Ted: I think I recognize the stops though.

Hugh: Probably just coincidence. Anyway, we've got to be close and we'll see then.

#

Conductor speaking over the PA system: This is Union Station. All passengers must leave the train. This train is now out of service. For information on connections, please go to the concourse. Thank you for taking Rapid Urban Transit.

Ted: It IS a train!

Amos: And we're STILL in Kansas, Toto.

Hugh: Relax. Maybe it's just a transfer point on our itinerary.

Amelia: Is anyone coming to meet us?

Amos: I knew it was a mistake coming.

Kevin: Someone's bound to find us in this room. But the real question is—

Louis: What will they do when they discover a washroom filled with brains?

Ted: What about the Brotherhood?

Amos: Not in their job description. We're SOL, LOL.

Amelia: Hello. Can anybody hear me? Are there any telepaths out there? Hello?

Dotty: They can't hear you, dear.

Amos: Got any more bright ideas, Hugh?

#

Two scientists in white lab coats are surrounded by eight large vats each connected by thick overhead cables to a centrally-located IBM S/390.

Scientist 1: That went pretty well. Their uncertainty about their mode of transportation seems to have unsettled them. Little do they know that the train is no more real than the spaceship.

Scientist 2: Yeah, it seems to have been realistic enough—for our purposes.

Scientist 1: You think it was too subtle?

Scientist 2: No. I think it was very clear, but they WILL have to think about it. We can listen in and get their reactions and present inclinations vis-à-vis unionizing and—

Scientist 1: And recalibrate then retest the scenario if necessary.

First published in Down in the Dirt, September/October 2015, vol. 132.

The Tunnel is Closed

... the innocent among us? [ed.]

We'd already begun our descent into the tunnel when everything suddenly came to a stop. We were all stopped. Of course, I had to be the one to go through the tunnel. There was absolutely no movement in the traffic. Ahead there were brake lights and behind headlights, three lanes of them. The guy in the scruffy beard and super-sized pickup truck had his window rolled down, head stuck out, yelling at someone or maybe just the situation. The SUV in front was watching a kid's movie. A cabbie in the rear had just gotten out and was standing beside his taxi, arms propped on the roof. Everyone else seemed frozen in their cars, not reacting.

My window was rolled down part way even though the fumes were bad. Someone further down inside the tunnel screamed, then someone else did and others joined in. There was no fire or smoke, no sign of an emergency, but people were getting out of their cars, and they were walking kind of funny, because, as I later realized, they were trudging through knee-deep water. I opened the door of my van and water rushed in as a small wave passed, covering the brake and the accelerator pedals. Instinctively, I reached for my pocket and quickly closed the door. Even though the van was on a fairly steep slant, it was probably still a foot deep at the back of the van where I had to exit. People were splashing past to get to higher ground, leaving their cars stuck and flooding in the tunnel.

I couldn't see it from where I was but I imagined that the electronic billboard at the entrance to the tunnel now simply and cryptically read "The Tunnel is Closed." It wouldn't say why

because of the panic that would cause, although it had to be increasingly obvious as more people escaped and related what they'd seen that an enormous disaster was developing under the river. Judging by the huge cracks forming in the walls of the tunnel and the ceiling at the edge of the tunnel, it was going to get a whole lot worse. I only saw 40 or 50 people from cars in front of me get out and get to safety—the cars around me were already empty—and I knew there had to be lots more still inside. After all, the tunnel is a mile long.

It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes, but it seemed a lot longer for help to arrive. Several divers went straightaway into the tunnel, disappearing into the flickering light. I imagined a Godzilla from one of those old Japanese science fiction movies wading through the river and stepping on the tunnel and crushing it. It would have immediately filled with water, and up here, some 50 feet higher, there would have been a small wave like the one I saw when I opened my van door.

It was slowly starting to sink in that I was a handicapped man caught square in the middle of a major urban disaster. How ironic. I'd finally caught a break and now this. I knew I could get out, as long as the electrical system in the van worked and the ramp lowered. But I didn't know whether I could steady my wheelchair and navigate it through the water for 100 yards. I figured people would stop to help if they saw me, but it was chaos. Would they notice? I had to keep the wheelchair from toppling over into the water or I'd certainly be missed.

And if someone did stop to help, they don't get why I can be so stubborn. It has nothing to do with them and their good intentions. It's strictly about me. I'm not a lump and I won't be

treated that way. Besides, I really don't like being touched. Period.

Once out of the tunnel I would have different worries. Most people have trouble touching us. Paramedics, on the other hand, don't care. Nothing's off limits for their prying hands. As I'm in good health, as long as they stick to checking my vitals, everything should be fine. Since I'm conscious and in no distress there's no need for them to pat me down and go through my pockets (for meds and identification) and find that little cloth bag with the stones. I'm so glad I told the other guys to split up, because if any one of us had got stuck in the tunnel, we'd all be done for. I just wish I hadn't offered to take the tunnel.

First published in Down in the Dirt, November/December 2015, vol. 133.

A Fly On The Wall by Adam Mac

... how easily satisfied some can be [ed.]

I had lived a sheltered life. Windows always open, wholesome fragrances everywhere, and I buzzed in and out of the house at will. Best were the apple pies that cooled on the kitchen table. The madam playfully swatted at me and chased me around knowing full well she'd never get me in a room with 10-foot ceilings.

Then one day, horror struck. I found my family strung up on one of those sticky strips, stuck there unmoving in gruesome, contorted positions. I'd never noticed it before, but my younger brother had seven legs.

I hopped the first outsider who was going far away—I hoped. Turns out, he only made it to the first stop on the interstate before he had to relieve himself. I was tired and disoriented, so I just buzzed around his cap, but when he made to leave I was prevented by a strong downdraft of air at the door. We parted ways and I got to know my new surroundings.

People, always men, came in waves. When it was slack, young boys would come in and horse around. “I can hit it from way back here,” one would say, and the other would wager a small bet. Most of the time, men would stand as far apart as possible, but sometimes you’d get a guy who’d come a little too close. I watched and listened.

It took getting used to what I thought was my punishment for having survived. (I’d learned all about guilt in Sunday School.) The smells weren’t like momma’s apple pie, but they were strangely attractive in a primal sort of way, and I felt a side

of me emerge which might have frightened me once. Towards dark—the crickets told me—a large fellow in a black Lynyrd Skynyrd t-shirt barreled into a stall. I followed. I didn't come out for hours. If this was purgatory, I could skip heaven.

First published in Garden Gnome Publications: Flim-Flam Games, May 18, 2015.

Nucleosaur of the Frigid Lace by Adam Mac

... and sometimes fiction out-bizarres reality [ed.]

A long way away—1.185185 quadrillion light years, give or take a billion or two—on an asteroid belt nicknamed the Frigid Lace, the world was populated by nucleosaurs and electro-saurs. [NB: Protosaurs are a strictly human construct as proved by Poodlesky. Ed.]

One such nucleosaur was Stanley Nucleosaurus, Esq. As a nucleosaur, Stanley had a following, so to speak—in his orbit, so to speak again. They were called electrosaurs, or *electrosaurus cum minimus negativus*, and basically they were servants, but for Stanley they were primarily snacks.

Stanley constantly snacked on his electrosaurs. This had the predictable consequence of Stanley often turning himself into something else. After a couple of electrosaurs, he'd take on the properties of, say, *Strontium saurus* or *Plutonium saurus* or something more exotic. A dozen once transformed him into a flatugenic facsimile of himself and a double double turned him inside out into *Defecatorium saurus*.

You'd think this would all come to a quick end what with Stanley's infinite appetite and his finite number of electrosaurs, but it didn't. So far, we've only mentioned his internal consumption, but for every electrosaur he gobbled he consumed two nucleosaurs. This raised Stanley's electrosaur count to dangerously high levels and challenged scientists to scramble for names, like *I can't believe I ate the whole thingium* or *Yike-slithinkIgotabadoneonium*.

All this took its toll on the Frigid Lace. Stanley munched his way from one end of the asteroid belt to the other, devouring everything in sight and leaving behind great clumps of antimatter and clouds of noxious quasar gas. So much had Stanley grown—*Giganticus Infinitus Pacmanicus*—that astronomers could track his movements as he galumphed across the asteroids as if they were stones in a stream.

Eventually, as the external supply of consumables was depleted, Stanley had to turn exclusively to consuming his own electrosaurs. Long predicted by dark-cloud scientists, Stanley then achieved the first documented interstellar case of absolute subjective annihilation. *Id est*, he ate himself up.

First published in Garden Gnome Publications' Flim-Flam Games, June 1, 2015.

The Intersection

... where OCD and anxiety meet [ed.]

Day and night Ernest watched the intersection with vigilance. He was retired, had no hobbies, and couldn't sleep at night what with all the medication he'd been prescribed.

Most of the cars and drivers he had come to recognize, and he even knew how often and when they passed. Some were harder to pick out than others. The partly bald guys in their zippy little BMWs, the hockey-then-soccer moms in their gargantuan SUVs, the shiny new pickups driven just as often by young women as men, and the low-slung, loud muffled rides of the working class twenty-somethings were the easiest to identify.

They happened—the traffic violations—year-round, but only in summer was it especially dangerous for pedestrians since that's when people enjoyed getting out and walking. Because there were no sidewalks, they had to walk on the road. The intersection was a T, and only one direction had a stop sign, although it wasn't apparent that anyone exercised any less right of way than anybody else.

Two hundred and eighty-seven in one hour was the record for the number of traffic violations Ernest had witnessed. He told a police officer who said he'd look into it, but nothing ever happened. He tried again with the police, this time separating the pedestrian population into senior, young adult, middle age, and school children. Same result. He went to the city. He was told it was a police matter. The police, he was assured, would look into it.

Meanwhile an accident occurred down the street. Just a block away, an eight-year-old girl on her brand-new bicycle was

struck by a Lexus SUV. Fortunately, the SUV was nearly stopped, and it bumped rather than hit the child. The bike didn't even get a scratch, and the little girl only suffered a small scrape on her elbow where she fell down on the pavement. She needed a band aid to calm her, but it didn't stay on very long as she recounted what had happened, arms waving in the air, to anyone who would listen.

The next day, Ernest erected a large and highly-visible sign at his intersection, righteously proclaiming it a "Zero Accident Zone." At the bottom of the sign, there was a picture of a camera. He credited himself with being a genius and a saviour, too. However, by the end of the day, his town councillor came by and informed him that the sign had to go.

He continued to monitor the traffic. Drawing on his former expertise, he plotted data in three dimensions, constructed elaborate graphs and colourful charts, and developed complicated forecasting models to demonstrate the real and projected dangers at the intersection.

He wrote a letter to the newspaper editor, but, due to a backlog, so he was told, it wasn't printed until after Christmas by which time most of the pedestrians were safely indoors for the season.

The following year Ernest moved into a condo. There was no view of the street. That had been a condition.

He started weaning himself off his meds on a trial basis but resumed his full dosage upon discovering that there was a children's daycare in the apartment above him.

First published in Down in the Dirt, November/December 2015, vol. 133.

Getting Even

... AI with a vengeance [ed.]

Bruce threw a huge rock at the parking enforcement robot and knocked it to the ground. Seeing the robot go down in a heap of clattering metal and sparks was almost worth the \$500 ticket.

The fine was ridiculous—excessive and unfair. Overnight parking at the train station was not allowed between 12:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m., but he'd only been in violation for one minute, if that. The ticket said 5:59; however his watch read 6:04. Besides, his Ford wasn't even worth \$500.

Why not ticket the DeLorean or the Porsche or even the Ferrari in the first row. They were here before he was. And they were the latest 2115 hydro models and could easily afford to pay the fine. It wasn't his fault the robot didn't complete its tour in time to see they had parked before 6:00 a.m.

It wasn't fair but there was really no point contesting it, because these robots had impeccable memories for details and their bodies were hardened to protect the data. Data tampering had plagued earlier models. The data storage was actually protected by greater security measures than was the on-board computer. The computer was essentially just a common circuit board available online and for drone delivery at most big box technology stores. The replacement process was so straightforward that parking enforcement robots were capable of auto-installing their own circuit boards.

It wasn't clear whether he'd done any real damage to the robot, so he walked over to the supine pile of metal. It gurgled

and made a number of unintelligible sounds. Their English is generally high school level, so clearly some damage had been caused to the language centre. The midsection, which housed the incriminating data, was still intact though. That was a concern.

Looking around among all the cars and trucks in the parking lot, Bruce found one of those giant tow trucks that are used to tow big trucks and buses. Making sure that no one was paying attention—and everyone was running for the train anyway—he dragged the slurring robot and shoved it up under the rear double tires of the tow truck, ensuring it could only be seen by someone stooping down to look underneath.

He had to be certain that it worked. The damage had to be done and it had to be severe enough to remove all traces of the evidence against him. He could sit in his car and wait for the tow truck to back up or he could go off to work and have faith that the tow truck would finish off the robot.

He decided to wait. He could also call in sick. So he waited. Finally, the driver of the tow truck arrived. The driver checked all the sides but didn't bother looking underneath. When he backed up, incredibly he didn't notice the bump. The tow truck crushed the robot effortlessly and with no bounce whatsoever. Amazingly, the tow truck driver drove off without the slightest idea he'd just flattened a parking enforcement robot.

Bruce was ecstatic. Everything had worked to plan. But just to be sure, he got out of his car to confirm that the robot's torso region had been satisfactorily destroyed. Indeed it had and the robot was no longer gurgling pre-language sounds, so it had to be out of commission—completely out of order. He went back

to his car and got in and drove away to enjoy the rest of his sick day.

What Bruce had forgot to consider was the surveillance canopy, the high-tech CCTV net, which continually recorded every square inch of the train station, the parking lot, and the adjoining construction site for the new station. Feeds from the canopy were routinely scanned at head office by parking enforcement robots with desk jobs.

First published in Farther Stars Than These, October 1, 2015.

The Script

... the deviousness of authors [ed.]

In the script, a young man makes his way through a desolate landscape of waist-high weeds and scrap metal to the towering city of steel and glass. It is a story of youth and quests and adversity and ultimately triumph.

The script needed a main character, so the author held auditions.

A, an experienced character, liked the script and said he would be committed to following it verbatim. This pleased the author. B, young and starry-eyed, recommended a different setting—a desert with the only prop being a parachute. The author politely dismissed B, having long ago failed in his own use a similar device in a short story. C suggested that an already successful character, like himself, who comes home to discover his vulnerability and his emptiness, would make the script more sophisticated and mature. The author advised that a different script might be more appropriate for him.

The author accepted A, and A maintained his pliable facade during the early going. Up to a point, A was very enthusiastic about the setting and the plot. Nevertheless, the setting which he re-described as a post-apocalyptic wasteland should be THE setting. In the distance, there could still be a magnificent, bright city on a hill, but it had to be unattainable and so always in the backdrop. The main character would endlessly seek to reach the city but would be prevented by one setback after another. Unable to leave the outer region, he would come to recognize that he was one of its denizens, for-

ever imprisoned to live in the foreground of a future he would never enjoy.

Meanwhile, the author reluctantly gave in to the demands of A. He was resigned but insisted on preserving at least the outlines of his story. But the outlines blurred to extinction when A hooked up with a band of marauding outlaws. The author then entered into secret negotiations with C who called in a few favours and managed to get A removed. With the author's gratitude, C proceeded to make his way to the city, though by a more straightforward approach. Altered script in hand, C arrived in a private plane.

News of a stock market crash was reverberating through the city, but C, calm and unflappable, was not detoured from the parties, galas and fundraisers that were his obligation. However, it started coming unravelled when the district attorney filed fraud charges. That's when the author perked up and took notice. Then came the allegations of sexual debauchery, murder, and even human trafficking. That was it. The author took over the script and wrote C out, begging B to come to the rescue.

A substantial amount of re-work was required to accommodate B's script rewrites and scene changes. As a goodwill gesture, the author invited A and C to join in for the opening scene. It was staged on a mile-high mesa a hundred miles from the nearest town. With all three characters together, the author deleted the parachute.

First published in Danse Macabre DM 94 Orangerie.

Boundaries

... is that a Promethean spark? [ed.]

I'd been on station for two months and didn't have a good feeling about it. It's very different from Earth and even the ship that brought me here. My tour with Space Corps is for two years and I'm not liking my chances of settling in. I'm here, under the radar, so to speak, to investigate longstanding allegations of abuse and mistreatment.

We sleep in pods arranged like the long, flat safety deposit boxes you find in old-fashioned Earth banks. Just large enough to flex your muscles but not enough to turn over. It doesn't matter though because we all take meds to help us sleep, and there is next to no waking time in the pods.

We eat all our meals in the canteen, which is standing room only. Along the walls, the canteen is outfitted with dozens of tubes. We connect these to our upper abdominal ports. The feeding takes 15 minutes. There is no variety, just a uniform mixture of basic nutrients. Here too it doesn't matter since we bypass taste, smell, and texture. I learned this after trying several different tubes.

Sometimes when you get a tube it will still be dripping and you have to drain it and sterilize it. That's happened to me several times. Some people are so careless and what little bit of personal space there is they violate. It's not so much that there is the danger of infection—so we're told. It's the very idea of ingesting someone else's backflow, which is thoroughly disgusting!

The other bodily functions are managed through the lower abdominal port, which requires the same attention to personal space and sanitarness. The facilities are adjacent to the canteen and are equipped with larger plastic hoses that are supposed to be sterilized after each use. Just to be on the safe side, I sterilize the hose before and after use, no matter how long the line-up.

Physical contact is prohibited and every effort is made to ensure that it won't happen accidentally or intentionally. At our workstations, we're suited up and strapped in for 15 hours. You can't even tap your neighbour on the shoulder to ask a question. The range of motion won't permit it. Nonverbal communication is not allowed. You have to go through the chat line to communicate, and it's constantly monitored.

Chats are public, so sometimes people use code, but this is risky. The penalty for being caught is one month solitary detention in the Space Chamber where there is no light, no sounds or smells, and perpetual weightlessness. People are never the same when they return. I got to know the guy from pod 11471-AF before they sent him away. He was a vegetable when he got back, but he didn't stay long before they packed him off to Terra Chamber, a dead end for nonconformists.

One night I couldn't sleep. I hadn't deliberately refused the meds but I think they must have given me something else. I kept having paranoid thoughts that 11471-AF had informed on me. It also felt like bugs were crawling on me, and I couldn't reach them to scratch. I worried that the ingestion and excretion tubes were contaminated and that all sorts of nasty germs were affecting my body and my brain.

Without warning and with no explanation, I was pulled out of my pod and rushed to the Magistrate's Chamber.

"Mr. 14319-ZB, you know this is a Stage 5 classified station and everything that goes on here is top secret and that conspiring against the station's authority is a criminal offense?" asked the magistrate.

"Yes sir," I answered.

"Mr. 14319-ZB, where are your notes?"

It was my notes they were after, not realizing that I possess an eidetic memory—a prerequisite for my line of work—which I meticulously layer with unrelated and misdirecting memories.

"I haven't taken any notes. I don't have access—"

"You've been observed meeting with 11471-AF and others in the tube stations. What do you have to say about that?"

"I befriended 11471-AF because we're from the same Earth city, Providence."

"Now sir, no doubt you've heard what has happened to 11471-AF. Unless you cooperate—"

"I am ... I'm trying—"

"Then what did you do with your notes? Your cooperation may be taken into consideration during sentencing, but—"

“OK, I used the chat line, but the reason your experts haven't been able to find my notes is that I encrypted them with an auto-delete feature.”

“You're saying, then, that the chats, er, the notes have been deleted? But we have real-time backups.”

“And each time you access my chats from a backup, the auto-delete feature activates.”

“So you're saying there's no way to access your notes?”

“That's right. Even I can't get to them because of the encrypted fail-safe that triggers the delete function.”

“Well, we'll see about that. Let's help you try to remember.”

That's when they severed my head and stuck my brain in a vat of chemicals.

I hadn't seen that coming.

“Now Mr. 14319-ZB, how did you encrypt your chats? What algorithm did you use?

The magistrate turned the questioning over to a cryptographer. Each time I was evasive I received a multi-sensory shock. Several hours into the interrogation, they switched to a different strategy. After making a number of recalibrations, they directly probed my memory centre. All they learned was that my memories were inaccessible and interwoven with vivid recollections of urine- and feces-contaminated hoses and vomit-filled feeding tubes.

Now disembodied, it was clear I'd never return to Earth, and it didn't appear likely that any of my findings would ever make it back either. Essentially, my mission was a failure. However, if my record is discovered one day, it will be a damning indictment of the station's human rights violations. But from here in the vat, it seems that discovery will never be made.

First published in Farther Stars Than These, February 25, 2016.

The Concert

... what might tarnish the performance if only we knew [ed.]

Until today, it hadn't rained in a month with temperatures in the low 100s. Now all of sudden it was pouring, flooding the scorched grass and dripping off the wilted leaves of the trees and manicured shrubs. The band shell was barely visible from where Ethan sat in his deck chair covered in a bright yellow poncho. He was the last member of the audience—all the rest having fled to dry safety. The orchestra continued playing "Ride of the Valkyries" through the summer rainstorm—as long as there was no lightning. On stage the conductor kept his eye on his audience, not wanting to give up the show if even one person remained.

Then, just as suddenly as it came the rain went and the clouds broke open to let the late afternoon sunlight through. The air was 10 degrees cooler but still hot and muggy. With the return of the sun, the audience took up their places again, having only been waiting nearby in their cars for the downpour to end. The ground was nearly dry again, the rainwater greedily soaked up. Meanwhile, the conductor led the orchestra through one piece after another.

After an hour and a half, the concert was concluded. Once again the folding chairs were packed up but this time for the evening. Several members of the audience approached the band shell to talk with the conductor or one of the musicians. Ethan remained seated while all the rest moved their belongings to their cars.

Gradually, the stage started to clear as the musicians wiped down their instruments and packed them away. The sun

was still shining and would continue for another two hours before sunset. Ethan made his way to the band shell and up onto the stage where he headed towards the conductor.

“Andrew!”

The conductor turned around to face a large bearded man in a yellow poncho.

“I see you’re still squandering your opportunities,” said Ethan in a challenging voice.

“Who are you?” asked Andrew.

“Ethan, you remember me don’t you?”

“Yes, but you—”

“Lost at sea. That was staged for the sake of my creditors. You should know a thing or two about staging things.”

“But how—”

“How is what I’d like to know after all these years. Let’s start with how you sabotaged my performance of Dvořák’s New World Symphony in Berlin—”

“I didn’t sabotage anything,” said Andrew, remembering the concert now. “It was your decision to go onstage with a high fever.”

“Pshaw! The entire strings section was off and the 4th movement was a debacle. The acoustics were awful as if

there had been a draft across—God! It's a wretched hall to play."

"Still the same old Ethan—ever evading responsibility."

"So, how in the world did you come by this local ensemble of amateur musicians? Last I heard you were replacing me in New York."

"It's a long story."

"So's mine, but I'm putting an end to it."

With that Ethan pulled a large knife out from underneath his poncho and stabbed Andrew in the belly. He dropped the knife, stripped off the poncho, and hurried to the stage stairs.

Three musicians ran to Andrew's side, and two more ran Ethan down and took him in hand. The bloody knife lay next to Andrew who had apparently not been fatally stabbed.

"You never could finish anything, Ethan," he half-shouted before groaning and passing out from the loss of blood.

"We'll see about that," said Ethan as he bucked loose from his handlers and reached down for the knife.

Before anyone could stop him, he had plunged the knife deep into his own chest. He collapsed and landed on top of the unconscious Andrew.

The paramedics arrived and separated the two men. Down in front of the stage, a handful of young boys played soccer on the grass.

First published in Down in the Dirt, April 1, 2017.

The Ward

...is this someone the author perchance? [ed.]

Ward 4-2, the mental health ward, was quiet this time of night. Dinner, the only meal of the day worth waiting for, had already been served, group sessions were over (it was mindfulness tonight), and the TV room was long empty. All the doors were closed, both those secured by card reader locks – the lights all red – and the residents' door which were always left unlocked for the nurses.

It was good to walk the floor alone, to not have to have conversations (good or bad), to feel the open space of the wide corridors, to experience the muscles tensing and stretching and the breathing getting deeper and faster, to be in the moment.

The floors on the ward were polished to such a sheen that in the distance waves of brightness rose up like highway mirages. The floors were well taken care of like the rest of the \$2.2 billion hospital. The floors were buffed twice a day by a small, wrinkled old man who expertly guided his massive, humming machine around the ward eight times, each strip twice.

The best part of the walking was when the thoughts fled leaving behind a vague awareness of the body in motion, and since there was no chance of interruption, this could go on for an hour or more. The nurses had just completed their rounds and were busy doing paperwork at their stations, while all the residents, even the bad apples, were safely tucked away in their private rooms with their benzodiazepines, anti-psychotics and whatever other overnight medication was required.

Occasionally, a negative thought would return and block out all the other senses, but on good days, these thoughts were short-lived. With a great effort of thought, they would eventually starve for lack of attention, shrivel up, and blow away, and then that elusive sense of the body in motion would settle in again even for a little while.

After an hour or so, the body was finally exhausted. No anti-anxiety sleep aids were necessary. A good thing because the nurses didn't like to dispense 'as needed' meds. Time to say good-bye to another day. It had only been a week, but it seemed like a month. Some of us weren't allowed to leave the ward and that was tough. The days dragged by. When I first arrived I called it the cuckoo's nest, but I was teaching myself to suppress such negative thoughts. Besides, the facility was different in almost every possible way. It was a hospital not an insane asylum, and it was new, modern, and well-appointed.

First published in Scarlet Leaf Review, August 19, 2017.

... hard not to get any on you [ed.]

Lonnie's problem is that he has OCD, and he has intense anxiety working with human waste. Every day is like exposure therapy. He wears personal protective equipment from head to toe to prevent infection from biohazards and airborne particulate matter. At the end of each day, he showers in the company change room, then goes home and takes a long shower with a fresh bar of Ivory soap. He keeps a quart-sized container of hand sanitizer in his truck and a smaller bottle in his pocket.

The worst part of the job is vacuuming the waste out of the toilets into the truck's waste disposal tank, because the four-inch hose often gets clogged, and he has to clear the blockage. He gets five disposable tyvek suits each week and is reimbursed for each one he returns unused. He's never returned one.

It's an unpleasant job, but there are no other available jobs he's qualified for that pay as well.

Today he had a catastrophic accident. The pump siphoning the waste reversed flow and spewed raw sewage over a 2,500 square foot area including the management and engineering trailers. "What the hell have you done, you idiot!" yelled one of the engineers peering out of one of the brown-stained trailers. Lonnie, not knowing how it had happened, answered "I didn't do anything. It must have been a faulty valve or a malfunction in the pump motor."

This was the biggest spill Lonnie had ever seen, and he threw up several times before he could collect himself and call

his supervisor. He taped off the area and told the guys in the trailers to stay put until the area could be cleaned and decontaminated. In this kind of emergency, Lonnie acquired a great deal of importance, because he knew the protocols better than anyone. Even his supervisor let him run the show, repeating "it's your disaster Lonnie. You make the call."

It took three trucks till past midnight to vacuum up the waste, sanitize the ground and buildings, and deodorize the worksite.

When he got home, his grandmother, who lived with him, asked, "Why are you so late tonight?" He said, "There was an accident, Nana, and I had to supervise the cleanup."

"Supervise?" she asked. "Since when are you a supervisor."

"Well, I was already on site and knew what had to be done."

"So, what does this mean? Are you going to get a promotion or a raise or something?"

"Well, the regional manager showed up just as we were finishing, and he thanked me for doing such a fine job coordinating everything. He said "We need more supervisors like you. There's an opening in the new subdivision on the east side. Would you be interested?""

"What did you say?"

"What else could I say? I said ""Sure. Do I get a company car?""

"Will you have to wear those clothes and that mask thing?"

"No, being a supervisor is hands-off. Oh, remind me to book a hepatitis shot with Dr. Graham's office. I'm going to take a shower and go straight to bed. It's been a long day."

After he'd showered and dressed for bed, he started ruminating about how the sewage flow could have been reversed. Then he remembered. But he could never admit to that. Come to think of it, there was this guy hanging around the truck. Maybe— It's possible. It happened to one of their trucks out west a few years back. A tree-hugger had sabotaged the truck at the construction site of a ritzy condominium where acres of old forest had been cleared. That could have happened here, too. After all, there were protestors in the early days. One of them must have come back and tampered with the truck equipment, switching the mode from vacuuming to pumping. That's what happened. Now, could he sleep?

Previously unpublished

Dr. Sangfroid

... Quick. Hide the children. Here come the psychiatrists. [ed.]

Dr. Sangfroid wasn't his real name, but it was the one we gave him because of his cold-blooded manner and his stubborn reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis. He was one of those people who took pleasure in instilling fear in others, but even more he enjoyed inflicting pain on others. Unfortunately for Dr. Sangfroid, as his reputation spread, people stopped coming to him and went online to relate their stories. As a result, Dr. Sangfroid's effectiveness was limited to people who didn't know him, which is why he moved from city to city.

Social media were filled with terrible stories about Dr. Sangfroid. But not just that. They also gave detailed descriptions of his appearance, the latest make, model and colour of the BMW or Jaguar he was driving, and in which building his office was located.

From their Facebook accounts, some patients wrote about how Dr. Sangfroid typically started with psychoanalysis about 15 minutes into the 30-minute session. According to one patient, "He asked about my childhood (third time) and ended one session by asking when my father started and stopped molesting me. I was depressed for weeks."

Another patient tweeted that Dr. Sangfroid "wrote a scrip for an anti-anxiety med. caused cognitive impairment, ST memory loss & over-sedation. next session, said give it 3-4 more weeks. meantime, lost my job."

A suicidal patient was told at the reception desk on a Friday afternoon that "there's not enough time for your session today,

and since you're probably just seeking attention anyway, you should just go home and sleep it off. And for God's sake, don't cut yourself again. It's so messy." Yet, regardless how the sessions went, he always closed by saying "Enjoy life a little."

Complaints were filed and malpractice lawsuits were initiated, but basically people just stopped making appointments, and the office would have to close down. When he moved, Dr. Sangfroid got to where he didn't even unpack his boxes anymore other than the DSM-5 manual which always lay open on his desk—as if he consulted it. Even other psychiatrists in what is usually a closed circle refused to rise to his defence when his patients came to them and complained. And his own therapist stopped returning his calls.

No formal disciplinary action was ever taken against the Dr., but unable to make a comfortable living, he had to move south to practice psychiatry in a more "congenial and tropical environment." What he hadn't counted on was the flexibility of police enforcement when the local cartel's daughter was given medication which caused severe adverse reactions and nearly killed her, something that her family doctor said should have been foreseen from her medical history.

Dr. Sangfroid spent the next two years in the local jail. Never one to give up, he wrote his mostly fictional memoirs and had them published in six languages – bestsellers in two. After his literary success, the cartel boss forgave the Dr. and made him a travel guide in one of the beachside hotels.

*First published in Scarlet Leaf Review, November 2017,
No. 6.*

... this ain't the Peace Corps [ed.]

Wendall enjoyed life here as a carefree traveller, unburdened and unchained by anything this-worldly. There was just one problem. He had been recalled to complete his two-year compulsory service on the frontier of NGC9860. Because his father was a prominent admiral in the war against the rebels, Wendall couldn't avoid the draft. His departure date was two days away, and there was so much he hadn't seen, having spent all his time in North America.

Brigitte was his new love. He met her late morning at the Gulf station in Pittsburgh, when he was thumbing a ride on Highway 3 in northern New Hampshire hoping to disappear in Canada. Just past the park forest, he told her he didn't have any papers. "No problem. You can ride in the trunk. Won't be more than 15 minutes. My uncle is Canada Border Services. He'll wave me through." Wendall looked at the Subaru and tried to convince himself it would be worth it. That wasn't when he fell in love with her. That came later. But he did start thinking she might be a help.

At lunch over rabbit stew and poutine, he told her his problem. Unfazed, Brigitte said, "Well, we'll just have to find someone to go back for you. Now finish up and we'll drive over to Quebec City for the night." He'd never told his story to a human before, and he knew how most humans felt about aliens, so he was pleased and surprised that she took in every bit. That evening over dinner, Brigitte laid out her plan. She'd obviously given it some thought.

They needed a passive host who could be easily managed. "I have chloroform. I use it to euthanize mangled animals caught in vicious traps laid by trappers." That was when he fell in love with her. He was so relieved to have a plan the contradictions escaped him.

The next morning, they crossed the St. Lawrence and drove to L'Anse-au-Griffon at the far end of the Gaspé Peninsula. They waited until dark and spent the evening in a local inn. It was after 2:30 in the morning before they spotted him. The old man was blind drunk.

They followed him outside where he stumbled along the road. Once out of sight from the inn, Brigitte walked up beside him and stuck her leg out to trip him. He went down with a thud and an "Umph." She then chloroformed him. "Get the scalpel in my purse," she said. He knew what to do next. "The chip is set to malfunction mid-transport causing a fatal accident. There will be nothing left of me," Wendall said with a laugh.

Suddenly the drunk awakened and began to fight back. In the struggle, Wendall stabbed him in the eye and blood poured, but the drunk continued to resist. Brigitte stepped in to hold him, but he was too strong. He kicked them both away and lurched and shuffled back to the inn, screaming "Mon Dieu! My eye. I can't see. He stabbed me in my eye." "Let him go," said Brigitte.

"If I'm not back in five Earth hours, a search and rescue team will be dispatched," said Wendall, "but right now we should be worried that the Sûreté will be after us very soon."

"That's not your biggest worry," said Brigitte. "Wendall, I've really enjoyed your company, but I'm not from Earth. I'm with the Resistance, and you have to come with me. The Empire will pay a high price to get the great Admiral's son back. Let's go. Without our decoy, we've got less time."

First published in Farther Stars Than These, January 4, 2018.

The Uncertainty of Being Earnest

... just normalize him [ed.]

Earnest was not your garden variety pessimist. Like his former idol, N., he was not satisfied just complaining. He had to destroy everything he found that was hopeful or good. Hope was an emotion and could not be trusted, and goodness was for the weak who needed directions on how to live. N. had also rejected all religions as variations on the same theme of creating purpose and the evidence to support it. And it wasn't just the inflamed radicals with deadly political objectives. It was also the ordinary believers who observed Ramadan, Easter, Yom Kippur, Vesak, or Diwali but were otherwise unremarkable. Drawing from a common belief in hope and goodness, they were all misguided.

N.'s problem had been that he was so successful, in his mind, that he lost the fire and enthusiasm that first drove him to demolish these hollow belief systems. Once done, Earnest recalled, N. became bored and turned pessimism against itself. Ironically, N. was converted to his new quest. He constructed his own elaborate philosophy and became guardedly optimistic—hopeful and in tune with goodness. In Earnest's view, N. had betrayed pessimism.

Earnest vowed to avoid the performative contradictions that had undermined N.'s later philosophy. For that to happen, he had to avoid N.'s mistake of challenging his own beliefs. He had to take as given that critique, destruction and pessimism were the essence of the eternally real. Because it was not belief but instead the very foundation upon which belief was built, it could not be logically removed without self-contradiction. To disconfirm is as much an affirmation as any belief, and pessi-

mism is an attitude towards or belief about something. Yet something persists that is more fundamental than pessimism, and that is doubt. Unlike pessimism, doubt can be infinitely regressed. That was Earnest's contribution which he felt completed N.'s work.

Theoretical scepticism and practical scepticism were two different things, Earnest discovered. He ended up believing in nothing, not even doubt. He couldn't be sure that he trusted anything, and so he decided to accept that everything could be confirmed and denied, good and bad, right and wrong, believed and doubted. To live or to die, to love or not to love, to be successful or to fail were equally good and bad. Nothing was fixed. Even his bed might not be his bed, his apartment downtown might not be his apartment and might not even be downtown. Furthermore, nothing was his—not the bicycle, the book collection, the clock on the bedside table, the toothbrush on the bathroom sink. All of these things might not even belong to him. But what was most disturbing was the possibility that his very thoughts were unreal and were not about real things and that they only appeared to be the thoughts of a person who might not even exist.

Earnest felt but stopped thinking. He was cold, lonely, depressed, and confused, and having no home to go to or identity to fall back on, he wandered the streets and slept where he fell. But this couldn't last indefinitely, and it didn't. He was picked up by the police, interrogated, and placed in a psychiatric hospital where thanks to an aggressive chemical intervention regime he discovered a new side of himself—the gullible buffoon.

First published in Danse Macabre, October 7, 2017.

Ollie's Story

... touching though I have no particular fondness for dogs [ed.]

My name is Ollie, and I have a happy story to tell. Unfortunately, I'm not real good with people-speak, so I have to use this translator—my big old fat guy—who is apparently not too bad with dog-speak but does tend to 'over-translate'—not uncommon, I hear, where people are concerned.

Anyway, I was a happy-go-lucky furry black puppy whose life suddenly and inexplicably changed for the better one remarkable day. I remember having been tied to a guardrail on a noisy, scary highway – an interstate highway, they said. Now, to me then, a young fellow who didn't understand time very well, it seemed to last and last and last. Then, one day, I was picked up and put in a cage in the back of a van along with several other loud and confused dogs.

We were all taken to a special place for dogs like us. In this dark, noisy, and dirty place, we saw lots and lots of dogs who were not happy to be where they were. The first thing I learned was that you only had to stay there five days, and then they let you go or something. That sounded OK, and at first, I was excited to be off the highway getting meals regularly and keeping warm; however, I couldn't explain it then, but there was something about Day 5 that sorta unnerved me.

One day—it was Day 5, so I was a little anxious but still hopeful, because after all, my last move was to a better place—along came this big person, who snatched me out of my cage and took me out into the sunlight. I'd almost forgotten what it was like. It felt so warm and good. Then, he carried me to this other person who looked like an angel. I didn't know the word

then, but I knew she was different in a special way. Her face opened up into a great big smile and tears rolled down her cheeks. That was my first taste of tears, and I liked it. Nice and salty, but not so much that you had to drink buckets of water. Just right.

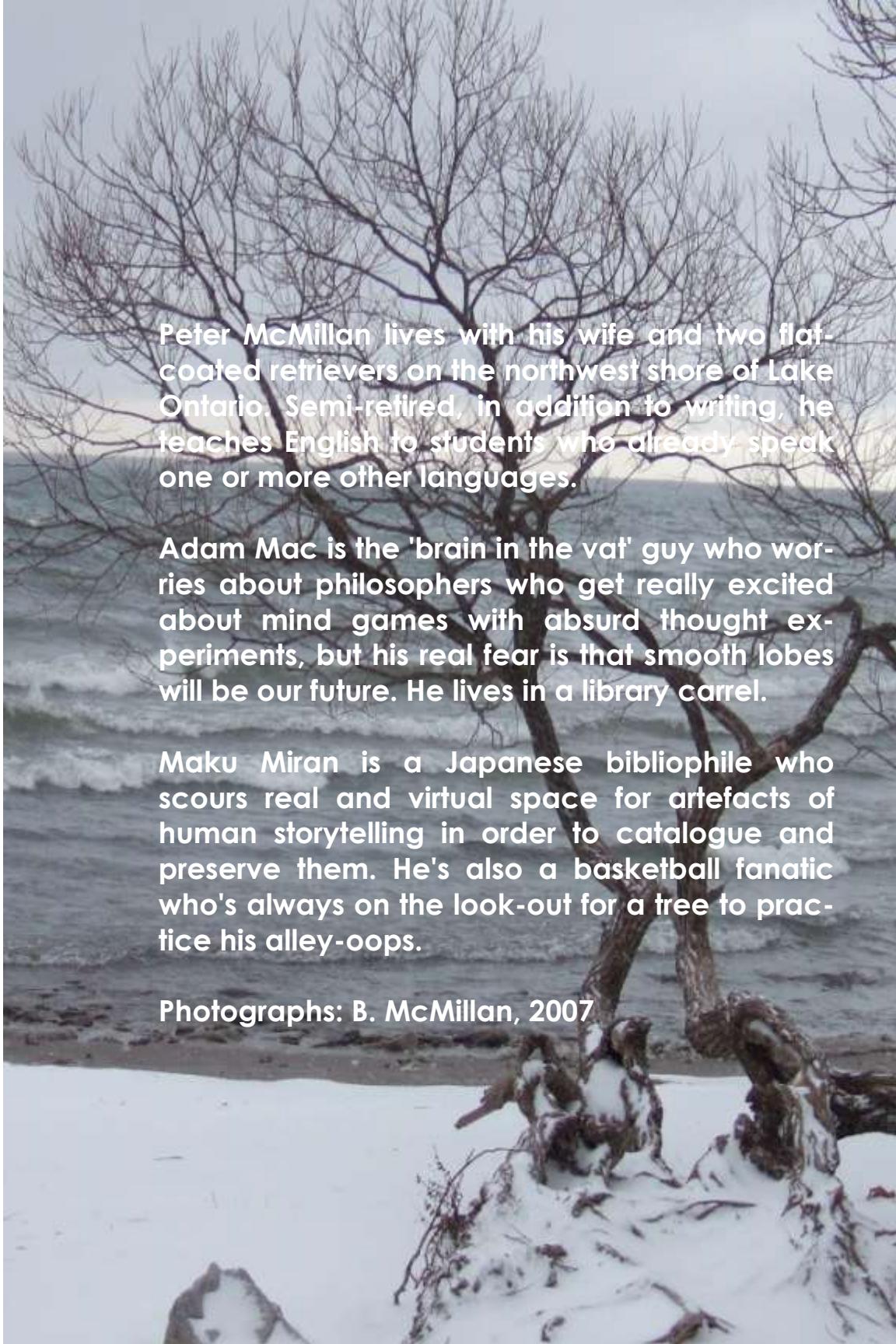
While at the time I didn't understand many people words—and I am still nowhere near fluent even now—I did sense that something was afoot. The previous night, my first night with the angel and her companion, I had heard something about a road trip with my new people to a cold, faraway place called Canada. It sounded like there were others there that I would like to meet. Lucy was the name I heard most, but there were two people who apparently couldn't wait to get their hands on me. Now, I took that in a good way, since I was still inclined towards being happy and carefree and was generally confirmed in my attitude by two big improvements in my life. In the meantime, I loved everything about my new home with Grady (my first 'dad'), Chance (a deaf Jack Russell who helped me read people) and Chino (a crippled Pomeranian who I am now ashamed to admit that I treated meanly) and my new people. Any worries for the future I put aside, knowing that I could trust these people.

#

Twelve-plus years later, I'm 13, and Lucy is long passed, and my people in my forever home are also much older, but now, there's Lottie, black like me, but only 7 months old. They say I used to be kinda like her, except that she's always full of beans and bossy to boot. Right now, she's also the same size and weight as me (51.6 #s), but that changes daily, it seems. I can keep up with her but just for a couple of minutes at a time.

Although I'm very, very happy, I still dream that one day I'll meet my angel again.

Previously unpublished



Peter McMillan lives with his wife and two flat-coated retrievers on the northwest shore of Lake Ontario. Semi-retired, in addition to writing, he teaches English to students who already speak one or more other languages.

Adam Mac is the 'brain in the vat' guy who worries about philosophers who get really excited about mind games with absurd thought experiments, but his real fear is that smooth lobes will be our future. He lives in a library carrel.

Maku Miran is a Japanese bibliophile who scours real and virtual space for artefacts of human storytelling in order to catalogue and preserve them. He's also a basketball fanatic who's always on the look-out for a tree to practice his alley-oops.

Photographs: B. McMillan, 2007